WESTERN ADVENTURE AND SPORT STORIES

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20c
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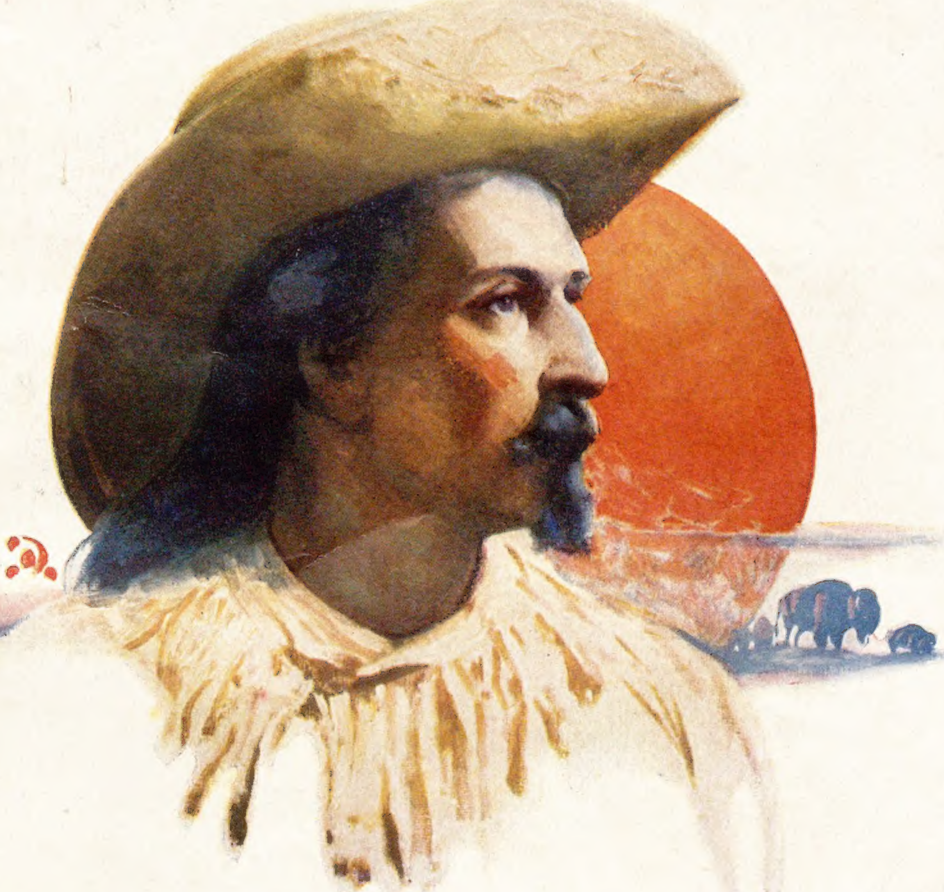
A CLAYTON MAGAZINE

Ace-High MAGAZINE

First January Number



Beginning

BUFFALO BILL—FRONTIERSMAN

The True Life-Story of a Great American

By FRANK WINCH

Your Money's Worth in Gifts
Buy to-day this Modern Way-pay next year

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Brings your choice
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$52.50
21 — Engagement ring with arrows, hearts and cupids; diamond on each side of large brilliant blue-white diamond in center. $1.00 with order. $5.15 a month.

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SEND ONE DOLLAR with your name and address, the number of the article you wish to examine and a brief note telling us something about yourself.

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Convince yourself of its remarkable value. If satisfied, you pay the balance in ten equal monthly payments. Otherwise, return and your dollar will be promptly refunded.

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26--Famous Bulova watch; 15 Jewel movement with dust-tite cap; radium numerals and hands. $1.00 with order. $2.87 a month.

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In Gift Box
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Tells time in dark with radium numerals and hands.
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28--Kent strap watch for men has all the modern improvements of watchmaking. (See features illustrated to right.) Sweet Quality guaranteed case; 15 Jewel jolt proof movement. Complete with new woven band in gift box. **$29.75.** $1.00 with order. $2.87 a month.

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—L. L. Cooke

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Chief Engineer

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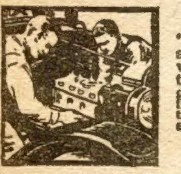
848 Spring St., Atlanta, Ga.



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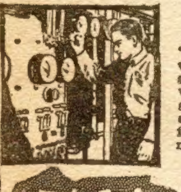
Phoenix, Ariz.



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"When I began with you I was just a common laborer going from one job to another, working for anything I could get. Now my salary is $3,500 a year and the Company furnishes me with an automobile."
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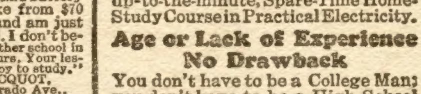

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Zack Farrar throws a six-gun challenge to an outlaw band.

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A blood-mad horse backs the play of a sheriff.

THE FRECKLE-FACED GUNMAN................Howard E. Morgan 86
A steel-nerved young sheriff strides with blazing guns into the midst of law-bucking trouble.

ROUND OATHS AND RUNS.......................James W. Egan 95
It takes a tight mouth as well as tight fielding to win this ball game.

BRANDED MEN.................................Hapsburg Liebe 102
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THE COUNTRY STORE.. 142
If you wish to exchange something you have but don't want for something you want that someone else has, here is the place to do it.

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What Do Women Want Most?

WOMEN want he-men for their husbands and sweethearts. None of this chorus-man stuff for the real girl. She wants to be proud of his physical make-up; proud of his figure in a bathing suit. She knows that it's the fellow that is full of pep and vitality that gets ahead in this world. He's got the physical backbone to back-up the mental decisions he makes. He'll win out every time.

Look Yourself Over!

How do you shape up? Are you giving yourself a square deal? Have you got those big rolling muscles that mean health and strength inside and out? The vitality that gives you the ambition to win out at everything you start? Make that girl admire you first and foremost for a real he-man and the hardest part in winning her is over.

I Can Give It To You in 30 Days

In 30 days I can do you over so that she will hardly know you. I'll put a whole inch of solid muscle on each arm in 30 days, and two whole inches of rippling strength across your chest. I've done it for over a hundred thousand others, and I can do it for you. I don't care how weak and puny you are. I like to get them weak and puny, because it's the hopeless cases that I work with best. It gives me a lot of real joy just to see them develop and the surprised look in their eyes when they step before the mirror at the end of 30 days and see what a miracle I have worked for them.

You'll Be a He-Man From Now On!

And it's no temporary layer of muscle I put on you. It's there to stay! With those newly broadened shoulders; that perfect neck and great, manly chest, you can maintain your self-respect in any society. Every woman will know that you are what every man should be—a forceful, red-blooded he-man.

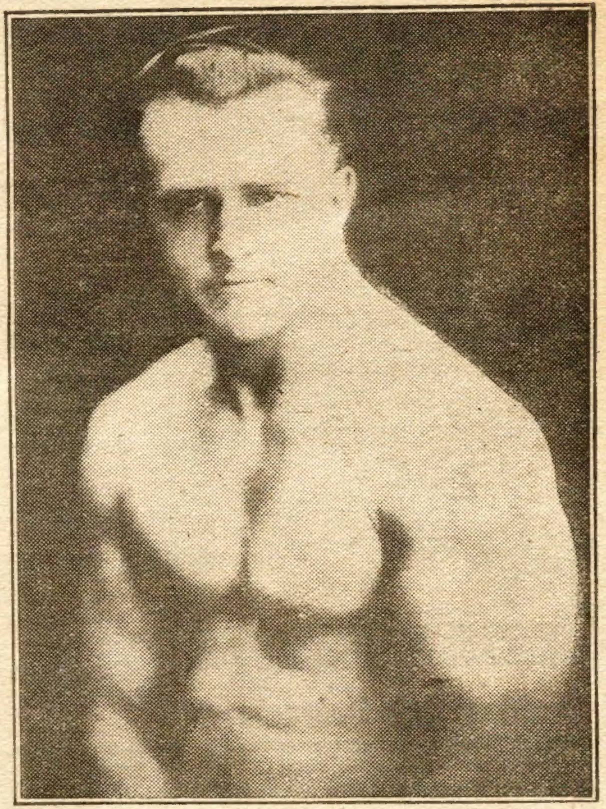
I Want You For 90 Days

If at the end of 30 days you think you have improved, wait till you see yourself at the end of 90 days. Then the friends you thought were strong will seem like children by comparison. I'm not called the Muscle Builder for nothing. My system scientifically builds real muscle faster than you ever imagined.

Watch Them Turn Around

Notice how every woman prefers the fellow who carries himself with head up. Notice how the broad-shouldered man always gets their eye. They want a dependable he-man when they make their choice—one who can protect them. And you can be that man. Remember, I not only promise it. I GUARANTEE IT.

Now don't put it off a minute. Get going to new happiness and real manhood today.



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Author of "Muscle Building," "Science of Wrestling," "Secrets of Strength," "Here's Health," "Endurance," Etc.

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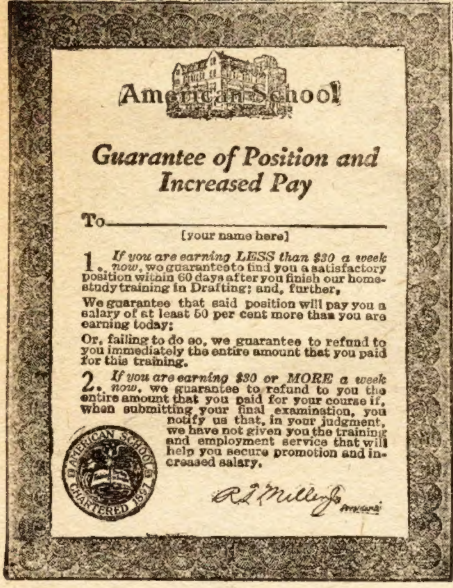

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(your name here)

1. *If you are earning LESS than $30 a week now*, we guarantee to find you a satisfactory position within 60 days after you finish our home-study training in Drafting; and, further,

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R. T. Miller Jr.
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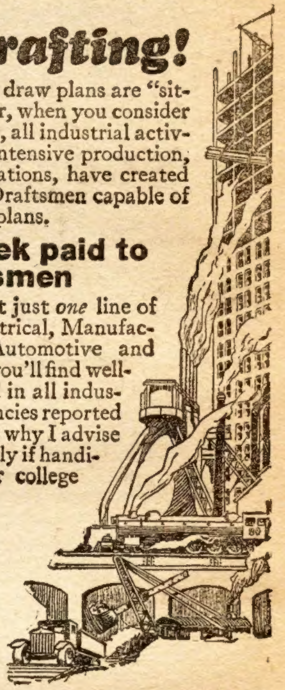

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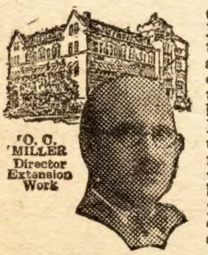
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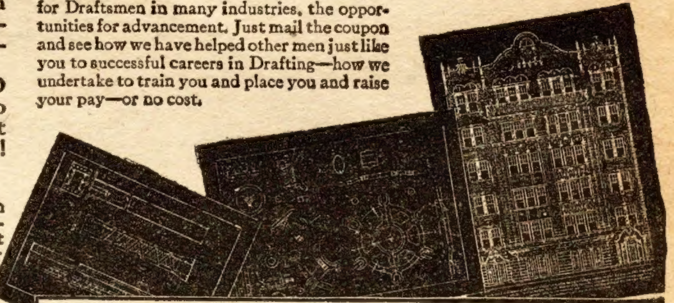

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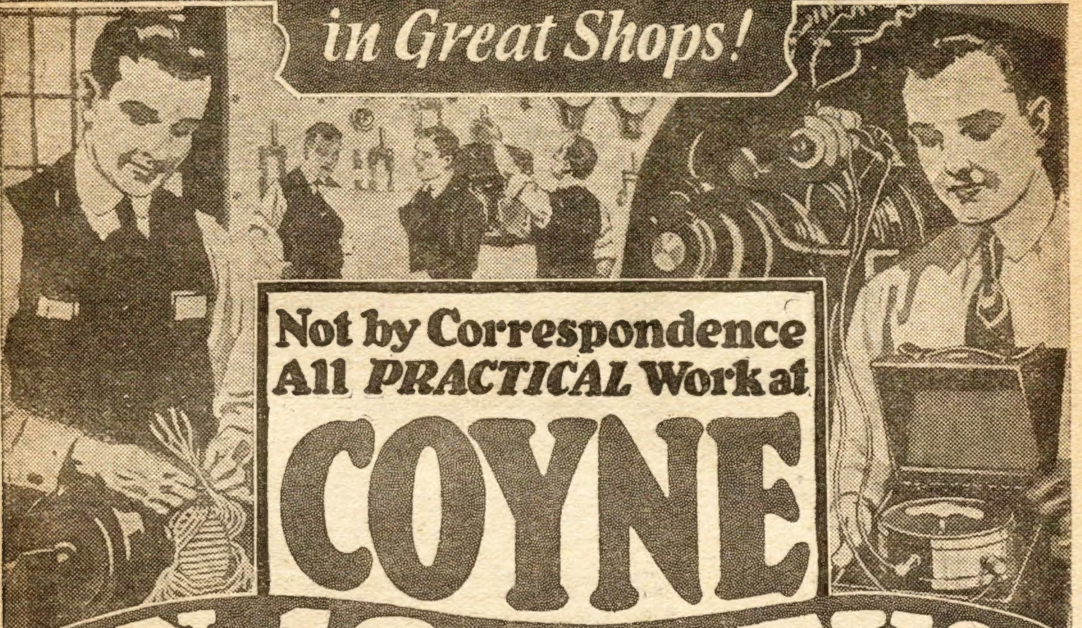

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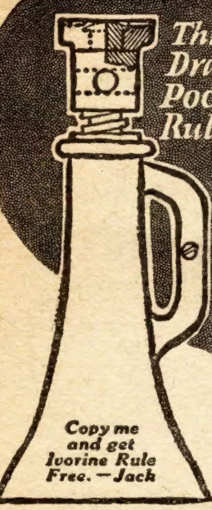
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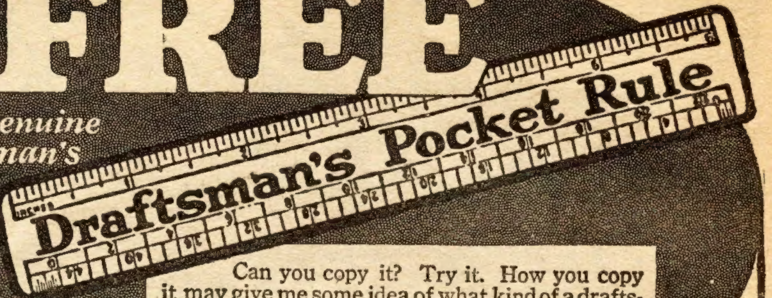

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Can you copy it? Try it. How you copy it may give me some idea of what kind of a draftsman you would be. If you are 16 years old or older and will mail me your sketch at once. I will send you free, and prepaid, a draftsman's Pocket rule just like the one shown here.

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You do not need previous experience. You do not need to be a high school graduate. My practical, home study course gives you just the kind of training you need to become successful. Your spare time is all that is necessary.

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After training you I help you to get a job without charging you a cent for this service. Employers of draftsmen come to me for men because they know men I train make good.

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What could be fairer than that? I don't ask you to take any chance. I train you under a positive Money Back Agreement. If my training does not satisfy you get every penny back.

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Engineer Dobe

You get these tools as my student

Write before you put this Magazine Down. Let me send you my books "Successful Draftsmanship" and "My Pay Raising Plan". Remember Draftsmen are needed everywhere. That's the kind of profession to get into. Get started now. Get into a better position, paying a good straight salary the year around. Mail this coupon.

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ENGINEER DOBE
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Address ______________________

Post Office ______________________ State ________

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Clerks and Carriers commence at $1,700 a year and automatically increase $100 a year to $2,100 with special increase to $2,300. They also have 15 days' paid vacation. Examinations are frequently held in the larger cities. City residence is unnecessary.

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Salary $1,260 to $2,100 a year. Pleasant clerical work in the various government departments at Washington, D. C., and throughout the country.

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New QUICK Guaranteed way to Selling Jobs

$60 to $200 a week for "average" men!

AS easily as you read your newspaper, you can *in a few months* master the SECRETS of selling and step into one of those wonder-jobs that pay *twice* and *three times* what you earn today! I don't care if you have only ordinary schooling—if you have only "average" brains—if you have no experience at all. Get in touch with me, and I'll put the most amazing chance before you, you ever dreamed about!

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"I was working as a clerk earning $1,000 a year, trying to support my wife and 3 children when I enrolled with N. S. T. A. After completing the Course, my income tax showed earnings of $7,286."—F. J. Walsh, Box No. 1586, Springfield, Mass.

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"Three years ago I was working in a shop for $15 a week. Today I am making $7,500 per year. I can only speak words of praise for N. S.T.A. for it raised me from that $15 a week job."—C. W. Birmingham, 1712 W. 1st St., Dayton, Ohio.

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It had to come—learning salesmanship *by selling!* N. S. T. A. put it over—we lined up the leading companies in a dozen lines, and arranged for them to employ you in spare time as a part of your instruction.

That's going some—getting actual selling experience, under brilliant sales-managers—AND GETTING PAID for learning—the chance to earn more than the cost of tuition before you finish!

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I want to prove to you that *you* can learn SALESMANSHIP quickly and easily by our new method. I want to show you that after you learn you can take your choice of a hundred jobs paying *thousands* of dollars more a year than you earn today. I want to tell you how the salesmen's job and future compares with your present one. *And I want to send you my astonishing contract to pay you $150 for learning.* Wire, write or mail coupon and find out how the N. S. T. A. are prepared to *guarantee your success in salesmanship* without your risking a dime.

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CONTRACT
To Pay You $150 for Learning—to Provide Spare-Time Positions with Million-Dollar Companies—to Teach You Salesmanship by Actual Selling!

Get $150 CASH for Learning!

Whether you are clerk, mechanic, miner, farmer, laborer, executive, salesman or professional man—if you're tired of small pay and the futureless monotony of your present job—if you want to double and treble your pay in the great selling game—shoot the coupon in with your name and address and get my free book MODERN SALESMANSHIP—get my contract to pay you $150 for learning—get the inside facts about how you can break into selling with the equipment and backing that guarantees you success.

CHAS. MICHEL, Extension Director
National Salesmen's Training Ass'n
N. S. T. A. Bldg., Dept. C-100, Chicago, Ill.

Rush free wonder-book MODERN SALESMANSHIP, your sensational contract to pay me $150 for learning and inside dope on selling opportunities.

Name..

Address..

Age.......... Occupation..

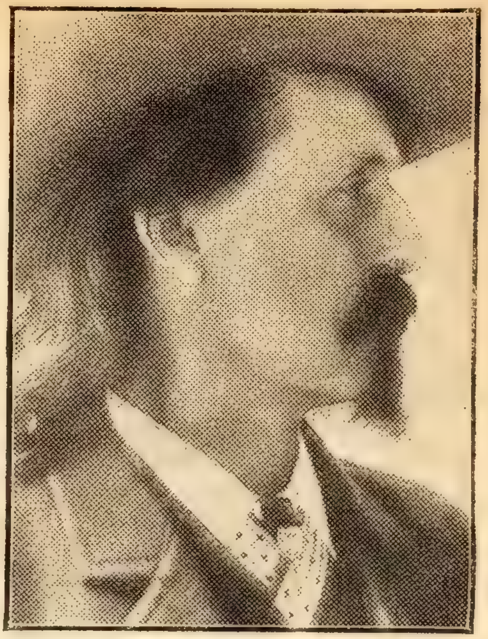
BUFFALO BILL—FRONTIERSMAN

THE TRUE LIFE-STORY OF A GREAT AMERICAN

By
Frank Winch

COLONEL CODY'S OFFICIAL BIOGRAPHER

The truth about Buffalo Bill can now be told. A greater biography has never been written.



PAHASKA!

TO you, Buffalo Bill, or, as I loved best to call you—"Pahaska, he of the long hair"—my loving thoughts are caught in the gentle words of the immortal Moore—

> There are hours long departed
> Which memory brings,
> Like blossoms of Eden,
> To twine around the heart.

FOREWORD

"BUFFALO BILL is dead!"

This message flashed across the continent on February 17, 1917. An entire nation bent its head in sorrow. Buffalo Bill, the most romantic character of the age, had gone, and with him passed much of the glory of the pioneer frontier.

The heart of American youth was broken; a tear hung heavy on the eyelash of the elders.

"Buffalo Bill is dead!"

Most people think Cody died rich—he did not. They think he was a great drinker—he was and was not; they think he was woman mad—he was more sought after than seeking; some think he was merely a showman—he wasn't in any sense of the word, yet Buffalo Bill was the greatest one-man drawing card the world has ever known. He has been accused of being locked up for stealing a horse; he has been accused of being a badman with a gun—many badmen of the West could in their day give some rather interesting testimony on this—all of which would be of a somewhat personal nature.

Buffalo Bill was one of the most genuine and famed American characters this country has ever produced. Washington and Lincoln are revered because they were men of sterling character and they made possible the great privileges and comforts that we enjoy today. They laid the foundation and drafted the principles of freedom. It remained for men like William Frederick Cody to enter into and enforce these principles. No man took a greater part in extending the civilization of the East into that great unexplored country beyond the Mississippi than Buffalo Bill. He guided many a caravan of homesteaders through the wilderness of the Western plains and safely landed and protected them while they and their families cultivated the soil and eventually built up the great and golden West of today.

Buffalo Bill was a fearless man, a dead shot, a fair shot; he soon either gained the respect or fear of those who sought to repulse him, and his name became known throughout the civilized world. For two generations the youth and elders of America have been thrilled and enthralled by the adventures, explorations and stories of Buffalo Bill, plainsman, pioneer, scout and soldier. His career was an interesting and an exciting one.

From a life among the Indians, sometimes alone for weeks doing scout duty, sleeping in dugouts or rolled up in a blanket hundreds of miles from civilization, he came to be wined and dined by the crowned heads of Europe and made much of by the nobility of foreign countries; but to the last he remained true to the land he loved best, his own America. A son of the West, when age and sickness overtook him he went back to the scenes of his early life, choosing to die among those he had known the longest and loved the best.

All in all, Cody was a great man, and after all a very human man. It was my privilege to know Buffalo Bill as few men knew him, and to share his confidence. For my mother his tenderest thoughts were always in evidence; for my wife his solicitude was that of a father; for my own daughter his was the love and adoration that I always bore him.

I worshiped Buffalo Bill as a child, adored him in youth. In manhood my fondest kid dreams became crystallized by the pleasure, privilege and honor of knowing him intimately, admiring him intensely, working, playing and even quarreling with him.

Many things have been written about Buffalo Bill—I believe I have read most of them and written some of them in the last thirty years. During his lifetime the efforts seemed to be directed toward pandering to his vanity—mere truckle in the latter years to pander to the whim of a man on whom years did not hang heavy. I did not idealize Cody nearly so much as I idolized him. There was nothing of the superman about Buffalo Bill—he was just a plain mixture of man, real man, all man, all through.

In what follows there will be no effort to embellish the pages with anything but facts simply and accurately related; no effort except to tell the story of Cody, the man, as I knew him from my babyhood until his death. Buffalo Bill did not fight all the Indian wars nor did he kill all the badmen of the West. But mighty little passed during his period as a plainsman of which he did not have first hand knowledge. Many of these stories were told to me by Cody in a happy hour, some on board a steamer, some in his private car, some at his Western ranch, some as we idled a vacation day horsebacking over the mountains, some as we chummed together in his private tent with the Wild West Show.

Newspapermen the world over tried time and time again to have the colonel relate his frontier experiences, but except in rare, very rare, occasions he would find some excuse and gracefully decline. Magazines offered him fabulous sums for his life's history—once and only once did he acquiesce and then he did not write a word, but merely related facts that had been common property for generations.

During his lifetime I wrote hundreds of thousands of words about him, but never once did I delve beneath the surface or penetrate to the depths with the stories that overcrowded my notebooks. This because Cody confided in me—and while I had material that would make better reading than any publicity story ever written, it could not be published—Cody looked upon his showman venture as a means to an end, and that end was an attempt to teach the American public a lesson in patriotism, to show in his exhibition the hardships of the pioneers, that we who followed might appreciate the efforts, love our country and become better American citizens.

That was his sole thought and impulse; to have written anything that would in his mind at least detract from the effect and draw attention to the cause, would have been perfidy.

In this work for the first time will appear many facts that have never before been published.

There is that intangible something in the history of the romantic frontier which makes an irresistible appeal to every red-blooded American. To those of us happily favored by circumstance in being able to claim the West as our birthplace, the appeal has a most pertinent and fascinating interest; and even more to those of us through whose veins courses the ancestral blood of the early pioneers.

My fondest recollections of babyhood are the wondrous tales of the Borderland told to me as I sat upon the knee of my illustrious grandfather. It was my exceptional privilege to know many of the noted men of the West, both white and red, and from them to learn a number of vitally interesting and intensely thrilling events that chapterize the melodramatic epochs of the Wild West.

Most of these sterling men of the frontier have been mustered to another life. Some, many, of the events with which they had to do, escaped the historian of their period, through no cause other than the diffidence of the worthy characters in that great human drama, to talk freely of their exploits, which to you and me would be exciting adventures, but were to them merely repetitions, shadows as it were, of their daily life.

History is merely the chronicle of great men. Their deeds remain alive forever. Time and epochs flicker only a moment and are succeeded again by time and men. As we each span our brief career, it is given to some to know great men only by the history they create; others, to do with, to know personally, to enjoy their confidence, to study at close range the qualities that distinguish greatness.

It is with considerable misgivings that the pages of my well thumbed diaries of yesteryear are brought to the light of public view. These memories are sacred to the man who was my friend from babyhood. It was never my intention to publish this intimate pen picture of my estimable Pahaska. First, the task was great, and secondly, Buffalo Bill has not yet advanced to that amber hour of history where the man could be considered and not the showman, where he would be taken at his real worth and not measured by the standards of a shouting, cheering Madison Square mob. I thought the time too close to set the right perspective that will come with mellower years. More than likely had I been left alone, these reminiscences would have merely gone down to my posterity as a family heirloom.

The gods interpose—my love's labor is finished. If then you find anything of interest, anything that will cause you to pause just for a second for a tender thought of this Grand Old Man of the plains, anything that will inspire you to better thoughts and better deeds, it remains for you to give full and unstinted credit to one of my most cherished friends, for without his kindly persuasion, inspiration and encouragement, this work would never have gotten beyond the scattered items in my yellow leafed and well thumbed diaries.

In appreciation and admiration, I respectfully dedicate these memoirs of Buffalo Bill to

Eugene Cody Stacy.

CHAPTER I

Boyhood Days of Buffalo Bill

BILL CODY'S boyhood days were unlike those of the average city lad. The modern youngster of the metropolis at the age of nine, has learned how to smoke and swear. Cody did, too, but the street gamin does not know why he smokes or swears—Cody did and was proficient in the latter art, if art it can be called.

At the age of nine Cody thought in terms of maturer years. The small boy of to-day is satisfied with marbles and baseball, possibly a movie thrown in now and then. Cody's companions at that age were the square-jawed bullwhackers of the overland freight wagon, his dog Turk, a pony and the Kickapoo Indian boys. His treasured possessions were a razor-edged knife and a rifle. His was an age when man made his own laws and carried their enforcement in a holster. The moral issue of right or wrong depended on the quickness of a trigger-finger. His environment was that of fights, bowie knives, Indian arrows, desperadoes and snap-shooting marshals.

The little red school was conspicuous by its absence. An adobe shack, a clapboard revamped barn served for the seat of learning, presided over by an itinerant tutor—itinerant because he seldom lasted over the week-end of some cowboy celebration, said cowboys having a peculiar penchant for seeing a schoolmaster dance as they kept time with their six-shooters.

Newspapers were to be had, usually yellow-edged with age. But what business had a lusty-lunged, supple-limbed boy of nine to do with the news of the far-away world when he could snuggle near the post traders' stove and be regaled with the wonder tales of the frontier, hear about the Indian fights, slip out on occasion to see a captured horse thief swing from a vigilant's lariat? Wasn't it more fun, more human in fact, for a boy of his age and environment to fill his idle moments on horseback, or to romp with his dog or get his first lessons in the art of marksmanship—at which he later became a master?

These are the things that occupied Bill Cody's mind at the age of nine—these with others. The boy was ambitious, his range of horizon was limited, naturally so, but even then he intended to be somebody or something. Just what or when or how, he couldn't fathom. He was restless, he wanted to go, but had no particular destination. How could one when people of that day measured time as having accrued between sunrise and sunset, and distance by the trails they knew and where they ended?

There was no incentive to godliness in this rough and rugged period—godliness as we in our more civilized age of degradation know it—but there was a manliness that pumped red blood through the arteries of this Western people. There was a knowledge of right or wrong—a knowledge that wrong would catch up with its own hand-dealt punishment on the plains. Bill Cody knew it was wrong to steal, he would tell you so in the choicest set of cuss words that ever slipped between a pair of boyish lips. The freighter teamsters drank, the cowboys drank and Cody drank. They all drank to excess at one time or another, and mostly when the supply lasted long enough to serve the purpose.

Seeing your own father ruthlessly and cowardly struck down by an assassin's knife, as young Cody did, would not engender the kindliest thoughts of impressionable youth toward mankind. Standing guard over the little home, defending a sick mother and helpless younger sisters against the onslaughts of ruffians, would not enhance a feeling of good will.

At this tender age Bill Cody found himself back to back with fate, the future uncertain, his own destiny nothing more positive than the chance to survive of a slender blade of prairie grass, parched and brittle in the torrid heat of the Kansas plains.

It is well to recall this early period of Cody's life as we thread our way through the corridors of events that made him in later years the popular idol, the man of the hour, the world famous Buffalo Bill.

Three months of his life were devoted to going to school, such as it was in that primitive era. Yet those who knew Cody in the years of his ripeness, knew him as a man of poise, a fluent and gifted talker, a model of culture, and well versed in the broad topics of the age.

While this youngster was still on the junior side of his teens, he sped a rifle ball that took a human life; he was doing a man's work on the plains and drawing a man's pay; he fell into the ways of the men with whom he had to do; he met and disposed of his man-sized problems in the manner and method of his day. A handclasp in friendship, or the lightning draw of a revolver meant only the occasion that called for each. Bill Cody at this age carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Do you gather the impression thus far that young Cody was a no-account, blustering, worthless, tough prairie kid? Then please read the pages to follow with more care. Your impression is wrong! Bill Cody met the issues of boyhood with the resistance called for. He was at heart a good boy, with the purest of thoughts, a mother's boy in every sense of the word. If he shot quicker than the other fellow, it was because instinct warned him that the man who shot quickest and surest lived the longest; if he cussed, and he did, it was because he interpreted his thoughts in the common language of the period. Cody was a sturdy youngster, lithe of limb, with a stout heart, a brain in which no moral turpitude was quartered, and a soul through which filtered the greatest, most adoring love for his smaller sisters and a consumptive, devoted mother.

Frank, honest and courageous as a lion, young Bill Cody fostered in early youth the qualities that were to impregnate his whole being for a life that spanned a fulsome career of seventy-one years. Cody, as a youth and man, detested hypocrisy; he had a straight name for everything and always used it, no matter what the place or the time. As a boy he was inquisitive, he wanted to learn, but the facilities were limited. He was a persistent, untiring searcher for the truth.

These stories about Cody have nothing to do with idealizing either the man or the boy. They may be uninteresting to the hero worshiper, or they may not be, but they are weighted in truth and as such will place Cody on heights that even his most ardent admirers never conceived. Set yourself to see the *real* Buffalo Bill —down deeper than the veneer—the man as he was known to his few intimates.

One day some years ago I had occasion to write a story about Cody. As I recall it the opening line read "A rosy cheeked boy rushed to his mother," etc. I noticed the slightest trace of a frown flit across his brow as he read the story in print, but he made no comment. Sometime later, while rummaging through my room—a thing he delighted to do—he came across the original manuscript of that story.

"Say, Frank," he said, "what does this mean?"

"What, Pahaska?"

"Here you say in your own handwriting,"—adjusting his glasses and reading —"'A dirty faced boy.' Why do you say in the printed article 'rosy cheeked?' Tell me, now."

"Well, you see, Pahaska—"

"Out with it," Cody broke in.

"My first thought was that 'dirty faced' would be more natural, but decided to say 'rosy cheeked' as it would sound better."

"Sound better, hell—it was a dirty faced boy—dirty good and plenty. In the future when you write about me tell the truth." Then with a sly smile, "If it's fit to tell."

You may have gathered the impression that this boy, Bill Cody, was a nondescript waif of the plains, unbranded as to the heritage of traditions of lineage. Wrong —dead wrong. On his father's side the Codys traced their ancestry as descendants of Milesius, King of Spain, whose three sons, Heber, Heremon and Ir, founded the first dynasty in Ireland about the beginning of the Christian era. On the maternal side the lineage runs back to the very best blood of England. Members of the Cody family first immigrated to America in 1747, settling in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia.

Izaac Cody, father of the boy, and his mother, moved to Iowa in 1838, settling in a spot named after Antoine LeClair, a half-breed Indian interpreter. This was in Scott County, where a few years before had been located the village of the Fox Indians and the stirring scenes of the last war dance of Black Hawk and his thousand warriors, and finally, the location on which the peace treaty between the Sacs and Fox tribes was negotiated.

The Codys were happy in the union that fate had knotted for them, they were contented to face the future in a new world just beyond the rim of civilization. Cody prospered as a farmer, he was an ardent lover of good horseflesh, and the prospects for a future with a life of contentment seemed assured.

It was here, in the hamlet of LeClair, Scott County, that their first-born came to make their modest farm house ring with happy baby prattle. They named him Samuel. It was here on February 26, 1846 that there came into this world another son, William Frederick Cody. The elders' cup of joy was filled to the brim, when out from nowhere darted shadows of sorrow. Samuel Cody was killed while yet a boy, in an accident.

It was here that other children, in all five daughters, came to assuage the grief-stricken mother. A change of climate was decreed necessary for Mrs. Cody. The California gold craze was just beginning to sweep the country, so in quest of health for his wife and gold for the exchequer, Cody senior laid plans for a migration to the land of reddened sunsets and golden dreams. His equipage was of the finest, consisting of three prairie schooners, and the family carriage drawn by a splendid span in silver-mounted harness. Through a strange coincidence, and one that led to important after events, the wagons were those made by the Walker Brothers of Goshen, Indiana. Walker wagons of that period bespoke a sign of distinction as being the last word of master craftsmanship in vehicle making.

It was in March, 1852, that Izaac Cody and his family started their western migration with their first objective as Kansas, which had not as yet been opened to immigrants. It was at Weston, Missouri, that Cody pitched camp, waiting for the signal to enter Kansas.

During the sojourn the elder Cody opened a trading post at Salt Creek. There were at this time two highways of western travel, the Santa Fe and the Salt Lake Trails. The Oregon Trail was just in the making.

It was at this time that the California gold fever was raging with all the fervor of a virulent epidemic. Caravan after caravan of pioneers and settlers crunched their way over the deserts. During the early part of May that year an immigrant train pulled into Weston bound for the West. The people in this train were not gold seekers, but adventurous souls bound for Oregon in quest of homes; hopeful and high spirited. The caravan lingered for a rest. There were one hundred twenty-nine people in this outfit. They came from all parts of the East, a family or so joining in from place to place. There had been elected as captain of the train a young man noted as a marksman, noted for his daredevil fearlessness and calmness in the face of danger. That man came from Goshen, Indiana, and his name was John P. Walker.

Cody and Walker met at the former's trading post. Instinctively and instantly each recognized in the other qualities that immediately bound them in a friendship. Cody confided his aspirations of later going on to the gold fields; Walker dissuaded him. The reports back East were not encouraging. He urged the other to join his train, come with him to Oregon and settle. Cody decided finally to remain for the opening of Kansas; his children then would be at an age when they could better stand the rigors of the long, dangerous, trancontinental journey into the wilderness.

John P. Walker and his pioneers started westward. One hunderd twenty-five souls obeyed his command. Eight months later the remnants of this outfit, twenty-six families out of sixty-seven, travel worn, in rags, battle scarred, with almost everyone bearing wounds from their fights with the Indians, reached the settlement called Portland, Oregon, and located.

For two years the Cody family remained near Weston, Missouri. It was here that Billy Cody had his first and only schooling. An inordinate desire to thrash a schoolmate nearly twice his size, and his love for the outdoors, shortened the period of study to three months. That was the first time he ever entered a school, and, after soundly whipping the bully of the class, it was the last time that Cody ever entered a schoolroom as a student.

But the lad enrolled for a curriculum in nature. His constant companions were Indian boys of a nearby friendly tribe of Kickapoos. They taught him their language and the art of sign talking, and from them he acquired an unusual proficiency with bow and arrow and in horsemanship. A mastery of rifle and revolver were included in the program of his achievements at the mature age of nine.

In May, 1854, the enabling act of Kansas was passed which provided for the opening of Kansas and Nebraska to settlers. This bill directly opposed the Missouri Compromise which restricted slavery to all territory south. A clause in the new bill provided that the settlers should decide for themselves whether or not the new territories were to be free or slave states. Izaac Cody located a homestead and entered his claim.

As was usual in a land opening, there was a rush of claim filers. In this rush came not only serious-minded men who wanted to lay the foundation for a home, but also swarms of cowboys, gamblers, gunmen, thugs and desperadoes. Representatives of both political parties came in droves, and the new territory of Kansas became the arena of a bitter, long drawn out, bloody contest between men who held opposing views on the slavery question. Izaac Cody foresaw the inevitable; already friendships were broken off, brothers turned against each other, hatred ran rampant.

In other days the elder Cody had achieved some local fame in Iowa as a public speaker,. and was more or less prominent in local political affairs. In some way it became known that he could make an address. The mob of proslavery factionists needed a leader. They did not know that he was bitterly opposed to their cause. Many efforts were made to secure an expression from Cody, but he maintained a discreet silence. Time wore on, and the bitter feeling between the two factions grew apace.

In the summer of 1855, a bronze-faced rider with his pack outfit drew up before the post trader's. It was John P. Walker. He made inquiries for Izaac Cody, soon located him and the friendship of earlier days was renewed. Walker told Cody of his experiences on his trip across the plains three years before, the hardships his party had endured and the settlement of Portland, Oregon, where the remnants of his caravan were happily located. Walker had started a sawmill, prosperity slowly came to him, his business was expanding, when suddenly in less than an hour the flames of a forest fire had reduced his plant to ashes. Needing new machinery, he had taken passage on a sailing vessel around the Horn, and purchased the necessary material in New York. The machinery was now in the hold of a ship westward bound. Walker preferred to make the return overland and would start again in a few days after a rest.

The next afternoon Izaac Cody had occasion to go to the trading post. An unusual crowd had collected and were harangued to a white heat of excitement by an orator favoring slavery.

"Here comes Izaac Cody," someone shouted. "Let's hear him."

Cody paid no attention, and attempted to go his way. The crowd became insistent that he should make a speech. Seeing no way out of it, and brave man that he was, he walked to a drygoods box which served the purpose of a platform. This he mounted, and slowly searched the upturned faces of the mob. His eyes met those of three friends, Hathaway, Lawrence and Walker, the latter standing off to one side, leaning against the corner of the trading post.

A sounding cheer rang out as Cody cleared his throat. Instinctively he felt that he had overtaken a fate which would be none too kind. Brave as a lion and fearless in soul, he paused for a second and then began.

"Friends," he said quietly, "you are mistaken in your man." Then, drawing himself to his full height, shoulders square and head erect: "I am sorry to disappoint you. I have no wish to quarrel with you. You have forced me to speak and I can do no less than to declare my real convictions. I am and always have been opposed to slavery. I am one of the pioneers of Iowa, gentlemen. I voted that it should be a white state. I shall vote the same for Kansas."

For a second there was a deathly silence, then whispers became murmurs and these turned to angry outspoken words. The crowd was livid with rage.

Suddenly from out of the mob sprang a man. It was Charles Dunn, a desperado and badman. He lunged toward Cody, a knife blade flashed through the air, then silently sank, hilt deep into the back of the valiant body. Dunn leaped from the box, and while he was still in midair there came the report of a pistol. The assassin turned a somersault and plunged face downward in the dust. John P. Walker replaced his smoking weapon in its holster.

The body of Cody swayed for a second, then sank, an inert mass, to the ground.

A boyish figure plunged through the crowd with an anguished cry, knelt beside the prostrate form, tenderly pressed his lips to the pallid face.

"Father!"

Then raising himself, and with his little fists clenched, he watched several of the crowd carry away the form of Dunn, not knowing he was dead, and cried out through tight-pressed lips:

"When I grow to be a man, I will kill you."

CHAPTER II

A Hero at Twelve

"GENTS! What's your verdict?" Walker moved slightly—both hands slid to his hips.

"Well, Sheriff," the foreman began. "Looks as though this Red Weston Dunn wasn't much account nohow and got in the way of a good man's bullet. We find a verdict of *not guilty!*"

The jury had been summoned on the spot—twelve men picked by Sheriff Morse from the crowd—and their judgement rendered within ten minutes after Dunn had paid the price. A few of Cody's sympathizers tenderly picked him up and started for his cabin. Walker reloaded the empty chamber, holstered the weapon, just as a small hand slipped into his.

"By Gawd, you're a good man," Billy said with eyes brimming over, "and a damn good shot. I'll never forget you for this."

Walker gathered together his pack outfit, mounted his horse, slung his rifle across the saddle pommel, and headed for the Oregon Trail. Forty-three years passed before Cody and Walker met again.

The incident above is related merely to cast the background of the boy upon whose shoulders was to fall a man-sized task—that of taking care of his family. It may be of interest to know that during the next two years Izaac Cody slowly recovered, but was constantly persecuted for his anti-slavery convictions. At one time his cabin was surrounded by a gang of ruffians bent on murder. He escaped dressed in his wife's clothes, while Billy stood guard at the front door, rifle in hand.

Nor was this the end. His hiding place found, another plot was hatched to murder the elder Cody. Mrs. Cody sent Billy to warn the father of his danger. In this he succeeded, narrowly missing death from bullets fired at him by the pursuing mob. In 1875, the elder Cody died. His remains now rest at Pilot Knob, which overlooks Leavenworth, Kansas. It was a warm summer day, about 1910, that Pahaska and I visited this spot, and it was there he told me of the facts related above and how he had reached a very definite turning point in his life when approaching the age of twelve.

He counseled with his mother as to their future. Billy took upon himself the responsibility of taking care of the family. Funds were running low and through unjust claims made upon his father's estate, it looked as if what little remained would soon be wiped out. Billy declared his intention of getting a job. Work in those days was not such as to fit a lad of twelve. Something had to be done.

His mother insisted that he should go to school; but Billy's practical trend of mind led him to think that his mother and sisters needed bread and butter more than he did an education.

A few days later he walked into an office in Leavenworth, Kansas. Over the door was a sign reading "Russell, Majors, Waddell, Overland Freighting."

"I want to see the boss," Billy said.

"I'm he, at least one of them," replied Mr. Majors. "What can I do for you, my boy?"

"Boy, hell! I am a man and I want work."

"What can a boy of your age do?"

"I can ride, shoot and herd cattle," said Cody. "I'm the head of my family now and will do anything honest that pays the best money, so that I can take care of my mother and sisters."

"What's your name, little man?"

"Billy Cody."

Mr. Majors looked at the handsome youngster for a second; he had known his father well.

"I would like to do something for you, but our work it too hard for such a lad."

"You pay man's wages for man's work, don't you?" asked Billy. "Give me a chance; I want nothing but what I can earn."

"All right, then, report to-morrow as an extra boy for the freight caravan going west on Friday."

With all the dignity that a full-sized man of twelve could muster, he gravely thanked Majors for the opportunity and hurried home to spread the good news to mother and sisters.

The latter demurred against his going away and the mother was insistent that he should remain and go to school. Billy pleaded, but in vain. That night — and Cody told me this nearly fifty years later —he knelt at the side of his bed and prayed for hours—how many he did not know. Suddenly a burst of sunlight edged through the window of his room. He quietly went to the living room, slipped his father's belt and guns around his waist, silently opened the door, closed it softly, and sped on his way to his new work while his mother and sisters were still asleep. Two months later he returned home, happy, and triumphant as he slid a hundred shiny silver half dollars into his mother's lap and kissed her.

The die was cast. Billy Cody had tasted the sweets of labor. He was now the support of the family and as such this homecoming was merely a short vacation. He had made good with his employers and there was work for him to do.

Billy Cody was thus thrown in the crucible of life where only the stout hearted had only but a small chance to survive. His first occupation was one filled with danger to life and limb, his associates were the rough men of the plains—and with these he had to share his lot, asking no favors for his age, taking things as they came.

Pahaska often told me in after years that this first trip away from home was his making. Seldom a night for those first two months that he didn't cry himself to sleep; the hardships endured bruised his body, but with the break of dawn, his pony was saddled and he was ready for whatever the day had to offer. Possibly his experiences then influenced views of later life; he could not countenance a lazy man. Many times he would pause before some finely put up school and watch the youngsters come romping out of the class rooms. He never made a comment, but that mind of his was thinking!

One day he pointed out a paragraph in some paper, relating to a youth being arrested for embezzlement. He sighed.

"Why, Pahaska?" I asked.

"Not like my time," he replied. "Young men in those days didn't have enough education to be crooked!"

Time came quickly for Billy to rejoin his freighter outfit. He was a popular youngster with the men, self-reliant, a master horseman; and he soon became provincially famous for his extraordinary ability as a marksman with both rifle and revolver. There was one teamster, however, with whom Billy quarreled. The only bully in the outfit, which was then accompanying a herd of beef cattle being dispatched to the army of General Albert Sidney Johnston, then a colonel, who was then fighting the Mormons. The incident about to be related would pass unnoticed were it not for the introduction of a character who was to figure prominently through Cody's life in later years.

It seems that the caravan camped one noonday on the South Platte some thirty-five miles from old Fort Kearney. Billy was worn out from a hard day in the saddle. A wagon master ordered the boy to perform some small service for him. Billy hesitated a moment, trying to unlimber his stiffened joints. The bully gave the lad a slap in the face that sent him sprawling to the ground.

Jumping up with a mad wish to avenge the insult, Billy reached for his gun. The wagon master closed with him, the boy tripped and as he did his spur caught in a coffee pot, throwing the scalding contents in the other's face. Infuriated with pain, the bully made a ferocious lunge at the youth, knife in hand. Just as sudden, and coming as if from nowhere, a fist swung out, caught the knife wielder flush on the jaw and he went down in a heap.

"What's it your business anyhow?" the wagon master demanded, rising as he drew his sleeve across his face to wipe away the blood, and looking into the cold gray eyes of a teamster.

"It's my business to protect that boy or anyone else from abuse, and if you ever lay a hand on little Cody again, I'll thrash you within an inch of your life. Come here, Billy."

The wagoner had met his master and knew it.

"Say, where'd you come from and what's your name?" asked Cody of the teamster.

"I'm boss teamster and my name is Hickok."

"My name is Billy, and from now on I'm going to call you 'Wild Bill'." That name stuck to Hickok to his death and will ever be recorded in frontier history as that of the man who often said and always meant, "Whoever wants any more fight must settle it with me."

Lunch over, the men other than the guard spread themselves for a nap under the wagons. Up to now the journey had been free from Indian attack. Cody was busy mending his saddle.

"Going to storm, ain't it?" he asked one of the drivers. "Look over there."

"Storm, hell," shouted the other after a glance, "them's Indians!"

They shouted a warning; the men hustled from their sleep, grabbed their guns and prepared for action.

From the clouds of dust burst forth the forms of Indians. A volley of shots came from the left, the air rang with war whoops, the cattle stampeded and were scurrying in all directions. Three guards fell at the first volley. Indians by the hundred charged the handful of men crouched behind the wagons.

"Get down there, boy," yelled the man beside Cody, who, flushed with excitement, was about to fire over the wagon top. "Them red devils can shoot like mad."

Cody crouched beside the wagon master and awaited orders from the boss. On came the Indians, mounted on snorting, hard breathing ponies, war-whooping to the accompanying horse-hoof tattoo, as they raced over the hard-crusted and sunburnt prairies.

The wagon men and Cody were all well armed with heavy Colt revolvers and Mississippi Yaegers, the latter a powerful make of gun carrying a bullet and two buckshot.

"Steady, boys," Frank McCarthy, the foreman, coolly sang out. Take good aim, pick your man—Fire!"

The Indians immediately drew off, but evidently only to re-form for another attack.

"Get your man, Billy?" asked a teamster.

"Gawd, no—too excited to pull the trigger." Bill almost hissed the answer.

"Make a break for the slough yonder," Frank McCarthy shouted, "then we can use the bank as a breastwork."

Obeying the order, and carrying with them the one man who had been wounded, the outfit for some time successfully defended themselves. But more than defense was necessary. They must reach the shelter of Fort Kearney or the small band, outnumbered ten to one by the Indians, must surely be wiped out. McCarthy gave instructions to make their way back to the fort by wading the river, keeping beneath the bank as a shield. Several miles were covered in this manner. The Indians on the high, steep elevation above kept watching for an opportunity to send a raking fire down upon the wagon men. A raft of poles was thrown together for the wounded man, and served also to keep their weapons dry when they came to deep water and had to swim.

Night came on and still the relative positions of the two parties remained unchanged. Tender youth began to feel the strain. Billy's strength began to ebb; he legged behind the others, first a few feet, then this lengthened into yards, and then the space widened still farther. Patiently, bravely, he struggled on without a whimper, summoning all his power of endurance. Body worn out, his brain was still alert.

Finally came the end—he could go no farther. Rather than ask for assistance from his tired but sturdier companions, Billy crept to the bank completely exhausted. His were the misgivings of a mind that could not make tired bones obey the brain's command. The moon at times peeped through the trees, fringing the crest of the bank. All was quiet save the gurgling water as the stream swirled and swished around the tired legs of the wagon men. They moved forward cautiously and slowly.

Billy crawled beneath a big boulder for a moment's rest, his body numbed, his eyes drowsy, his head upon his chest, nodding a willingness to toss off to slumber. Suddenly a twig snapped. Cody was alert on the instant. He listened. Then came the rustling of dry grass as if an animal were stealthily moving. Billy cautiously peered around the boulder's edge, and at the same instant the moon rays fell aslant the river bank's crest. In the distance, straight ahead, he saw the dim outlines of his companions slowly moving.

Then he looked above him. There, peering down the stream, lying prostrate, poising his rifle for a deadly shot, was an Indian with head plumed in chieftain's feathers. The redskin's rifle trigger clicked and at the same instant Cody aimed.

Bang!

A blinding flash, a puff of smoke, and the Indian came tumbling down to the water's edge—dead.

There was a fusilade from the rest of the Indians. Cody sank behind his shelter rock, uninjured, and waited the chance of another shot. Led on by McCarthy, the men returned and routed the Indians. Cody scrambled up over the bank, joined in the fight and had his first taste of Indian warfare.

Two of the whites had fallen — the Indians rushed away in retreat.

"Men, that first shot was the warning that saved all our lives," exclaimed Frank McCarthy, gazing at the Indian Cody had killed. "Who fired it?"

There was a silence, then Cody spoke up.

"I did," and this in all modesty.

"By thunder, Billy, you're a dandy." The wagon master grasped his hand. The men showered their congratulations on the blushing youngster.

"Mr. Majors told me," Billy remarked calmly, "that I would have to do a man's work to get a man's pay, and I'm trying to do it."

Thus, at the age of twelve, Billy Cody was to taste the effect of fame. The outfit shortly after arrived at Leavenworth, Cody was interviewed by a reporter and soon became known as the youngest Indian killer on the plains.

One time, many years later, when the Wild West was playing in Leavenworth, Pahaska sent for me. We engaged an auto, and taking Iron Tail, a Sioux brave with us, we drove to the location, as nearly as the colonel could recall it. Iron Tail spoke no English, but in the sign language Pahaska described the event to the Indian. In passing, let it be understood as will later be shown, that between Cody and Iron Tail there was the closest bond of friendship.

The old chief gazed steadily for a few seconds at the location, then with animation continued his talk in signs.

"What does he say?" I asked.

"He says," Cody replied with a wan smile, "that many of his race went the very same way through the same cause."

"What was the sensation, or do you remember, Pahaska," I inquired, "when you saw that redskin fall?"

"Remember? Always! My first thought was anger—and then take darned good aim—but as he fell dead at my feet, I was sick, sick with the horror of having to take a human life. That passed in a second, and as I scrambled up over the bank, wondering what Mother would say when she knew, I saw an Indian coming straight for me. I fired—he dropped dead at my feet—another was at his heels—he shot at me and missed—I killed him, too. But," and the colonel puckered up his lips, "I never said anything about these two. They made such a fool fuss over me with the first one that I thought I'd better keep still about the other two."

Imagine if you can—and if it wasn't your privilege to know Cody in his lifetime you can't—a boy of twelve, desperately fighting for his very life, with three dead Indians sprawled around him, and wondering what his mother would say!

It takes fine timber inground with maternal love and devotion to put such mother love in the heart of a boy of the plains. It was love, rather adoration, that became a reverent memory and was carried by this man of wonders to his grave.

On the return to Leavenworth, Cody had chosen his career. He would be a man of the plains. The publicity given him brought a certain amount of adulation and petting—both of which he detested. To get away from it he started for home and upon arrival found that fame had preceded him, much to his sincere disgust. He briefly related the episode to his mother and that night knelt with her in prayer for the forgiveness of his sin. A boy of twelve could hardly be expected to crave the lust of killing and he didn't.

A few weeks at home and the craving for the plains overcame him. He reported back for duty, was assigned to a freighter train of wagons bound for Utah which was being sent against the Mormons. The year 1857 brought a crisis in the struggle between the local government and the United States officials in Utah. The news that President Buchanan was sending out an army to enforce the laws and seat Alfred Cunning in the governor's chair, hitherto occupied by Brigham Young, caused the Mormons to organize against what they considered an unwarrantable invasion. They organized the territory in ten military districts, and Isaac Bullock was given command of Green River County.

General Albert Sidney Johnston was at the head of the United States forces. Great preparations were made for the campaign and the supply trains started across the plains early in the summer.

Mrs. Cody interposed objections to Billy's going with the outfit.

"Why?" I asked him one day.

"A mother's intuition, Frank," he replied thoughtfully. "A mother always knows. She was worried because of the danger from both Mormons and Indians. Then, too, she opposed it on account of my age. While I was determined to make the plains my vocation in life, she pleaded so hard, I was on the verge of giving in to her. Then she went to see Mr. Russell, who assured her that Lew Simpson, the wagon master of the outfit, was one of the most reliable men in their employ and that he would look after me. This seemed to satisfy Mother and I went, but before going I arranged with the firm that when my pay fell due it should be paid over to my mother."

The overland freight trains of that day were unique. The wagons were made in St. Louis, especially for the work they had to do. Quite large and strangely built, they were capable of carrying seven thousand pounds of freight. The trains were generally started from Leavenworth, Kansas, loaded to near capacity and were drawn by several yoke of oxen in charge of one driver. A train consisted of twenty-five wagons, all in charge of one man, who was known as the wagon master—in this case, Lew Simpson. The second man in command was the assistant, then came the extra hand, next the night herder, and lastly the extra driver whose duty it was to drive the lame and loose cattle.

All in all there were thirty-one men to a train. They did their own cooking, being divided into groups of seven. One man cooked, another brought wood and water, and another stood guard, each having some duty to perform while getting meals. All the men were heavily armed with Colt pistols and Mississippi Yeagers, all carrying their weapons readily available for any emergency. The wagon master in the language of the plains was called the "'bull wagon boss," the teamsters were known as the "bullwhackers," and the whole train was denominated a "bull outfit."

The trail to Salt Lake ran through the northwestern part of Kansas, crossing the Blue River, then over the Big and Little Sandy, coming into Nebraska near the Big Sandy. The next important stream was the Little Blue, along which the trail ran for sixty miles; then crossed a range of sand hills and struck the Platte River ten miles below old Fort Kearney. Thence the course lay up the South Platte to the old Ash Hollow Crossing, then eighteen miles across to the North Platte, near the mouth of the Blue Water, where General Harvey had his great battle in 1855 with the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians.

From this point the North Platte was followed, passing Court House, Chimney Rock, Scotts Bluff and then going on to Fort Laramie, where the Laramie River was crossed. After some distance the trail crossed the river at old Richards Bridge and followed it up to the Red Buttes, crossing Willow Creek to the Sweet Water, passing Independence Rock—Fort Bridge—the Devil's Gate, to the Three Crossings of the Sweet Water; past Gold Springs, Hot Springs, the Rocky Ridge through Echo Canyon and on to the great Salt Lake Valley or the badlands.

All in all the firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell operated 6250 wagons for the hauling of which they used 75,000 oxen and gave employment to 8000 men. The capital invested was over $2,000,000.

On this trip more than half the journey to Fort Bridge was accomplished in safety. They approached the Rockies and made a noonday halt near Green River in the Rocky Mountains. This was on November 21, 1857.

At this place they had to drive the oxen about a mile and a half to a creek and water them. Lew Simpson, George Woods, his assistant, and Billy Cody, accompanied by the usual number of guards drove them over to the creek. While on the way back they observed a party of twenty horsemen approaching. They were not in view of their wagons, a rise of ground intervening, and so could not signal the other freighters in case of any unexpected danger. They had no suspicion of being trapped, as the strangers were white men.

The party came within hailing distance —then one who proved to be the leader rode out.

"How are you, Mr. Simpson?" he inquired.

"You've got the best of me," Simpson replied, scrutinizing the strangers.

"Well, I rather think I have," coolly replied the other, whose words conveyed a double meaning, as they were soon to learn. The party of horsemen had them surrounded and were armed with double-barreled shotguns, rifles and revolvers. Simpson, his men and Cody at the time were armed only with pistols. The whole movement of covering the freighters was done so quietly and guns leveled at them so quickly they had no chance to draw their weapons.

"I'll trouble you for your six-shooters, gentlemen," the leader said.

"I'll give 'em to you in a way you don't want," Simpson replied.

"If you make a move you're a dead man," the leader shouted as three guns were leveled at Simpson. "Get out of the way, boy,"—this to Cody—"you might get hurt."

"If there's any hurting to be done, don't worry about me," the youngster replied, intently watching Simpson for a signal to draw weapons and begin shooting.

But Simpson, sensing that he was taken at a great disadvantage, and not wishing to jeopardize his party by any rash act, put up his hands.

"You have the best of me. What do you want and who are you?" Simpson asked.

"I am Major Lot Smith!"

"The leader of the Danites?"

"You are correct."

"Yes," Simpson said, "I know you, you spying scoundrel."

Simpson had instantly recalled that only a few days before Smith had visited the train in the disguise of a teamster. He had disappeared as strangely as he had come.

"Throw your guns to the ground," Smith ordered.

"Well, sir, what are you going to do with us now?"

"Ride back and I'll show you," replied Smith.

"I think, Frank," Pahaska told me one day in relating the incident, "that this was the only time that I actually ever felt even a little fear in all my life; of course, I was young, and that may account for it. The fear I had wasn't of any bodily harm that might come to me, but I was afraid they would make me become a Mormon, and the men had frequently passed the time around our campfires telling of the terrible creatures the Mormons were. And then, too, I didn't expect, from what I heard, to find them white people like ourselves, and this puzzled me."

"What happened then?" I asked.

"Well, we started back as we were ordered. Lew Simpson called me to his side and told me to be quiet, and also asked if I had thrown my pistol away. I told him no, and that I also had my knife. He told me to watch my chance and give him my knife; but the chance didn't come. One of the Mormons, seeing us talking, rode to my side, and led me to the rear and kept close to me. We had no idea of the surprise that awaited us. As we came to the top of the ridge from which we could see the camp, we were astonished to find the remainder of our trainmen surrounded by another group of Mormons who had taken all our guns. Other Mormons were taking from the wagons whatever articles they wanted.

" 'Smith, tell me this,' Simpson said, 'how did you surround my camp without a struggle? I don't understand it.' "

" 'Easy enough,' Smith replied with a sarcastic smile. 'Your men were all asleep under the wagons, except the cooks, who saw us coming and mistook us for returning California emigrants. They paid no attention to us until we rode up, got the drop and surrounded them.'

" 'What do you propose to do with us now?'

" 'I intend to burn your train. You are loaded with supplies for Colonel Johnston, and as I have no way of getting this stuff to my own people I'll see that it does not reach the United States troops.'

" 'What of my men and me—are you going to turn us adrift here?'

" 'No, I am hardly as bad as that. I'll give you enough provisions to last you until you can reach Fort Bridge,' Smith replied, 'and as soon as your cooks can get the stuff off you can start.'

" 'On foot?' Simpson asked.

" 'Yes, sir, every darn man of you,' was the reply.

" 'Smith, that's brutal, it's too rough on these men'—the Mormon looked at me—'put yourself in our place,' Simpson was arguing, 'and see how you would like it. You can well efford to give us at least one wagon and six yoke of oxen to carry us and our clothing to Fort Bridge. You're a brute if you don't do this.'

" 'Well,' Smith said, eyeing me again, 'I'll do that much for you.'

"We began loading a wagon, and as we finished Smith ordered us to start.

" 'Lot Smith,' Simpson said, 'my personal opinion is that you're a rascal and a coward to set us adrift in a hostile country without giving us the means to defend ourselves.' He had made a request for guns before, which was denied.

"Smith consulted with members of his party.

" 'You are too brave a man,' the Mormon said, 'to go without your guns. You can have them.' "

Feeling that it would be useless to try

to recapture the train, the wagon men started for Fort Bridge. They had gone about two miles when they saw smoke rising from the camp they had left. The Mormons had set fire to their train, which was loaded with all sorts of provisions and ammunition. Dense clouds of smoke rose to the heavens. They watched the fire and then pushed on. Fifty-two wagons were being destroyed.

The hours dragged on and just as twilight was coming, they saw a horseman approaching from the west. Thinking he was the outpost of another set of Mormons, Simpson made ready to make resistance and fight to the death if necessary.

The horseman approached to within hailing distance and was challenged.

"Who are you and what do you want?" shouted Simpson, leveling his gun.

"I am Jim Bridger," the other answered. "I saw smoke on the desert some hours ago, and thinking it was an emigrant train in trouble I came to see if I could help."

By this time he had ridden close enough to the wagon to be recognized by Simpson, who extended him a cordial greeting. The men talked for a few minutes and then Bridger said:

"Who's this boy?"

"Billy Cody—and game all through."

"That," Cody told me, "was the first time I had met Bridger, who even then was known as a famous scout and a noted Indian fighter. I was particularly impressed with his eyes; they were the keenest I ever have seen."

Simpson was mad all through at Smith and sought to find a means of revenge. He asked Bridger if there were any soldiers at the fort.

Bridger replied that the fort was now under control of the Mormons and that they were preparing to resist the soldiers coming under Johnston. He said that he had not been at the fort for some weeks, but had been scouting for Johnston to find the best road for the army to come through. He had been away from the main body for nearly a week.

Simpson wanted Bridger to turn back, find Johnston's army and have soldiers dispatched to help him overtake and capture Smith. Bridger had another plan.

"It would take two days to go from here to pick up Johnston's army. In the meantime Smith can work his way with the supplies he has captured to the south of the fort and get them to his comrades. That is the route I think he will take. My suggestion is this: I know Smith and he trusts me. I'll go on to meet him and stay with him until I find out just what he intends to do. As soon as I find out I'll make my way to Independence Rock and wait there. In the meantime, you send one of your men to intercept Johnston and get the soldiers. Then have them meet me at the Rock and we'll capture Smith."

Simpson thought the plan feasible. He had great faith in Bridger. They talked it over with the wagon men. The task was dangerous because of both the wandering tribes of Indians and the Mormons. None of the men relished the idea nor could Simpson induce any of them to volunteer.

"I'll go," Cody spoke.

"No, you're too young," Bridger said. "This is a man's job, Simpson, if you have a real man in the outfit—"

"Tell me the way," Cody insisted, and then he appealed to Simpson: "If it comes to a fight I'd only be in the way here. I can find the way if you tell me."

"Billy, you're a brick," Simpson replied, then turning to Bridger: "This boy is a man all through, and he can make it. But, Billy," turning to young Cody, "I told your mother I'd look after you and this is dangerous work."

"Mother would rather have me die fighting than to stay behind and be nursed like a baby," Cody replied. "All I want is some grub and a little more powder."

"Well, I declare," muttered Bridger, "that boy has the right stuff in him."

Jim took a stick and sketched the route for Cody in the sand. Billy watched him with interest. Then Bridger rubbed the sketch out with his foot, gave the stick to Cody and asked him to do it all over to make sure he understood. Cody duplicated the route perfectly.

"You're a born scout, my boy," Bridger said, patting Billy on the shoulder. Then he filled the boy's powder horn.

With a handshake all around, Cody started in a westerly direction. Bridger back-trailed to find Smith, and Simpson gave the word to go ahead.

Toward evening the next day Cody approached what had been Fort Bridge; it was now a mass of ruins. He had followed Bridger's directions, had seen no Indians or Mormons; in fact, had seen no one until he came within a safe distance of the fort, and discovered the disaster. Billy was in a quandary and he was tired. . . .

"Also, Frank, if you ever write this story, you can say I was homesick," he added when relating the adventure to me.

He slept in the aspens that night and before daybreak next morning he was awakened by the distant echo of a bugle call. It was the advance guard of Johnston's army. Later in the day he reported to Johnston, who was dumbfounded to meet the lad, and listened to his story with eager interest. Johnston took Cody to his own tent and sent soldiers to meet Simpson and his men. Lot Smith escaped and Bridger returned to the fort a few days later. Brigham Young, realizing that the government meant business, had issued an order recalling all the Mormon colonists then located at Fort Bridge to Utah, and on October 3rd, Louis Robinson, Young's agent at the fort, set fire to all the buildings.

General Johnston established winter quarters for the army at a camp two miles below the ruins of Fort Bridge. This was called Camp Scott in honor of the commander-in-chief. The command consisted of the Fifth, Seventh and Tenth Infantry, Second Dragoons and Phelp's and Reno's batteries of the Fourth Artillery. Captain Macey, with forty men, was sent to Fort Massachusetts in New Mexico for provisions, but did not succeed in getting back to the valley until the spring of 1858.

Cody was the youngest person in camp. The story went the rounds of how he had volunteered to go for help, and he became an object of interest and a popular young hero. It was here that he met Reno for the first time.

Returning to Fort Bridge, the wagoners and Bill Cody spent the long and tedious winter, suffering greatly from lack of food. As the cold months hemmed them in, supplies ran lower and lower, until they were obliged to kill their cattle for beef.

"I'll never forget that winter," Cody told me years afterward. "Some of the cattle were so poor we had to prop them up to shoot them!"

Better times came with the first bursting buds of spring. Two trains set out from the fort under the command of Lew Simpson, with Billy Cody installed as courier between the two caravans, which were to keep about twenty miles apart.

One morning Simpson directed his assistant wagon master, and the youthful Cody, to ride ahead with him to the forward train. They had gone about seven miles and were on a high flat plateau of considerable extent. Nothing unusual had so far attracted their attention.

"Look!" Cody suddenly shouted, pointing to the edge of a ravine about half a mile away, "Indians!"

"They are heading this way," Simpson replied, and then snapped out: "We can't escape on these creatures. Dismount and shoot your mules."

Flight was impossible and resistance against the band of fifty or more Indians almost hopeless, but to passively surrender meant death and mutilation. It was a case of fight, and fight to the last drop. The mules were shot and dragged into a triangular position. The two men and the boy crawled behind this bone and flesh barricade. The defense preparations were hardly completed when the Indians had come in range.

"Get ready—aim low and fire when they are about fifty yards away," ordered Simpson. Then in a solemn quiet voice, "Let every shot count to bring down a man."

Three Indians fell at the first blaze of the guns. Luckily only one of the savages carried a rifle. The rest were armed with bow and arrows. Cody's next shot toppled over the redskin with the rifle. The Indians kept the arrows coming from all directions. Around and around the little fortification the savages war-whooped and sent flight after flight of their deadly shafts. The two men and the boy kept firing as fast as they could reload—one to three Indians dropped at every blast.

At last, seeing their numbers being so rapidly reduced, the redskins withdrew out of gun range and held a council which lasted well over two hours. The whites, in feverish haste, used their bowie knives to dig up the earth, and piled it on the carcasses of the mules to make a better defense.

Soon the plan the Indians had formulated was put into effect. They started a prairie fire to dislodge the valiant three who were battling against terrific odds in numbers. But this attempt was a failure. The grass being short, the fire failed to spread and soon died out completely. Then the redskins settled down for a siege which lasted all night and well into the next morning. The white men's ammunition was running low, and by actual count if every shot thereafter struck down its victim there would still be a dozen Indians to the two defenseless men and the boy. Their only hope now lay in the coming of the second part of their caravan.

About 10 A. M., as indicated by the sun, they heard in the distance the cracking of bull-whips and the shouts of the wagon drivers. In a few moments they saw the foremost freighter coming slowly over the distant ridge, and soon the whole outfit came in sight.

Once more the Indians made a final charge—an arrow pierced the shoulder of Woods, making a slight wound. The other two fired and each scored a hit. The redskins, seeing that further battle was useless, made off in the direction of the ravine.

Billy jumped over the barricade, swung his revolver into action, caught a straggling Indian for a fair shot. The pony swung as its rider rolled to the ground and Cody had it lassoed in just about a second.

"Well done, boy," Simpson shouted. "How many Indians did you get?"

"Don't know," Bill replied, bringing up the pony. "Anyway, no more mules for me on this trip. This pony is good enough."

By the time the wagons caught up to them, men and boy had finished scalping their Indians. By common consent of the elders, Billy was credited with ten redskins, and triumphantly the scalps went on his belt.

"Billy, tell me this," Simpson said later as the men were enjoying their lunch, "were you scared?"

"Scared? Hell, no!" he replied. "I couldn't help thinking how funny those mules looked with all the arrows stuck in their bellies—made me think of home and Mother's pincushions."

(The next instalment is entitled "A Youth on the Plains." Read about Billy Cody's experiences as a Pony Express rider.)

PAWNEE BILL'S BUFFALO RANCH
Pawnee, Oklahoma

Oct. 20th, 1928.

Mr. Frank Winch,
Norfolk, Virginia.

My Dear Frank:

For many years I have urged you to write the story of Buffalo Bill. I am glad, very glad, to know that you have completed the work and that it is being published now in the ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE.

Your long and very intimate association and friendship with both Col. Cody and myself have placed you in possession of facts that no other man has, and that none could write as well as you. We have discussed this many times, I have read many of your manuscripts and they will carry to the public a new and better idea of the true Buffalo Bill. You knew him—understood him as friend to friend, man to man.

We all lived close together in those days and men have got to understand each other in the way we lived and worked in those days and times. The West that Cody knew is gone—posterity will be thankful that you have been able to record the facts of the man who played such a prominent part in that era of our history.

Ever your friend,
(Signed) G. W. Lillie,
PAWNEE BILL.

THE SHERIFF OF BLACK BUTTE

By Glenn A. Connor

A wise sheriff matches wits with a conscienceless killer—and a blood-mad horse backs his play.

"CADBY on Tantalizer!"

It was the last day of the Black Butte Rodeo. Sheriff Bat Jamison and his deputy sat side by side in the grandstand. Jimmy King had shown an absorbing interest all through the performance; now he leaned forward in a more tense attitude. Jimmy wanted to know the caliber of the man who was kidding himself into believing he could ride Black Butte's reputed unridable.

But big, red-faced Bat Jamison appeared to show no more interest than he had formerly. He leaned back, lids drooping, sleepy eyed. However, his bored manner was entirely deceiving. Not a movement took place out in the big arena that passed his notice. His face told nothing, a blank. But one might have noticed a brighter gleam to his eye at the announcement.

Tantalizer came out of the chute in a headlong plunge and a mad scream. The thud of his hoofs could be heard in the grandstand. The earth was jarred in the vicinity of the pens. Tantalizer was a hard bucker. Yes, and crooked!

But that straight-sitting figure on his back was a rider. The usual sight of daylight between rider and saddle in that first wild plunge out of the chute was not visible now. With musical tinkle of burring rowels, creak of saddle leather and slap of hat, Cadby sat glued to the saddle, scratching regularly without missing a stroke, from shoulders to hips, currying the mane, a living part of that volcanic action.

The timer withheld his signaling shot, for such an exhibition was seldom seen. Tantalizer's furious pace abated. The rider goaded him. The belated signal cracked. Pick-ups raced out but Cadby did not wait. He threw a leg over the saddle horn, lit on his feet as light as a cat.

Tantalizer whirled and lashed out with both hind feet, but his expected victim was not there. Heavy chaps and long-shanked spurs did not hinder Cadby's action. He leaped nimbly aside—no one knew exactly what happened then—when the dust cloud cleared Tantalizer was down, the victorious rider astride his neck, pouring vindictive blows upon the tender nose of the outlaw. While Tantalizer threshed his hooves ineffectually, Cadby held his head up with one hand while he beat with the other. As the pick-ups dashed up they stared in amazement, first at the blood-streaked face of the rider and his nose that was trickling blood, then to the bruised, blood-spurting nose of the horse.

Crimp Jones, quick to fly into a rage whenever he saw a dumb beast abused, tumbled from his horse and charged toward the maltreater with a bellow of rage.

Still holding the outlaw helpless, Cadby rose to one knee to meet the charge. His head jerked to one side as Jones made to plant a sledge-hammer blow, and the blow slid past Cadby's ear without harm. At the same instant, fingers clamped upon the indignant Jones' shirt front, jerking him among the threshing hoofs. Jones lit some half dozen feet away, dazed and bleeding.

"I'll learn a nosey cowhand tuh go buttin' intuh my business!" A malignant snarl curled Cadby's lips. He again raised his fist, blood-smeared and bruised.

Tuck Huston was a cool head. Seeing his partner kicked into insensibility in no way confused him. His hands worked with lightning speed undoing his rope. It took Tuck but an instant to shake out a loop, scarce two feet in diameter. He flipped it out without the customary swing, took a dally about his saddle horn and whirled his horse about without looking to see if the loop had fallen true or not. The rope jerked up with a snap; there followed a sharp yell. Tuck spurred his horse out for a couple of hundred yards, where he dropped his rope and returned to the spot where his partner lay unconscious.

It all happened in a matter of seconds. Admiring yells were cut short by dumbfounded stares, then gasps of horror. In as many seconds Cadby had made himself an object of loathing and disgust instead of admiration. He picked himself up out of the dust, glared after the departing rider, then turning was soon swallowed among the milling riders about the pens.

All this Sheriff Bat Jamison and his deputy, Jimmy King, witnessed from the grandstand. Jimmy King, half crouching, half standing, was in the grip of too many conflicting emotions for utterance. Jamison was sitting erect now, a grim set to his jaw and a stern look in his eye. He sat silent until Tantalizer had been led away dazed and bleeding, a strange contrast to his usual fiery spirt, and Crimp Jones had been rushed off to the hospital in an ambulance. Then his hand fell on the stunned Jimmy's shoulder with a gruff "Come along."

A half hour later they were seated in the sheriff's office, Jimmy on the corner of the desk, foot swinging idly. One might have said admiration struggled with disappointment for expression upon his face. Jimmy's eyes sparkled and grew somber by turns. Tantalizer had been his idol, the idol of all Black Butte. It hurt to see this king of outlaws fall. But *Cadby*—he had put up a wonderful ride!

That was as far as Jimmy's thoughts ran for the present. Until he grew to comprehend how their idol had fallen he could not go on to that which was much more difficut to understand. His admiration and respect for Tantalizer amounted to unreasoning jealousy.

Jamison sat in his chair before his desk, feet propped upon the latter, eyes staring vacantly at the wall before him. It was one of Jamison's traits that his face never told what his mind was doing.

If Jimmy had not been so busy puzzling out Tantalizer's downfall he might have wondered why his chief had ordered him so abruptly from the rodeo grounds and to the office. He generally held forth where he willed unless something important was pending. But Jimmy's mind was busy with his own riddles.

The silence continued for some fifteen minutes. Then Jamison broke it abruptly:

"Kid, what's yuhr lowdown on this Cadby?"

"A flash rider!" retorted Jimmy promptly. "Give Tantalizer half a show—"

"Don't be a plumb damn fool, kid. Cadby rode him right enough—straight up an' clean. Give th' devil his due. But that other deal?"

Jimmy shook his head in frank bewilderment. "It all happened so sudden-like I can't get th' hang of it."

"Simple enough. Vindictive cuss—mean an' vicious. Jimmy, what would you have done if a bronc lashed out at yuh like that? Under them circumstances I mean: an outlaw, which ain't no more'n can be expected of 'em."

"Tried tuh dodge—an' if I succeeded kept a-goin'."

"Prezactly. An' just what nine out of every ten, ye-ah, ninety-nine out of a hundred buckaroos would 'a' done. So that goes tuh prove my conclusions ain't theory but sound sense." Jamison abruptly switched to another subject. "Jimmy, this hero business is all bunk an' pure fickle. Look at us for instance. Folks around Black Butte has done a heap of boastin' about their Sheriff Jamison an' that live wire deputy of his'n. Reg'lar houn'-pups on a trail an' never quit short of our game. Then 'cause we fall down on one job we're dealt a heap of misery."

"Meanin' Mulligan Jack?"

"Meanin' Mulligan Jack. An ol' booze houn', a laughin' stock, too dang onery tuh live an' too dang onery tuh die natural. Then when someone comes along an' blinks his lights them that cussed him hardest laments his takin' off th' most." Jamison gestured helplessly. "That's human nature, Jimmy. 'Cause we ain't found Jack's killer folks say I'm losin' my grip an' yuh're layin' down on th' job."

"Let 'em go tuh hell. I've done all I could—"

"Too near election, Jimmy. We've gotta do more'n considered reasonable tuh expect. There's a lot of hombres layin' for an easy meal ticket—"

"Easy, hell! I've rode myself to a frazzle on this job. Rain or shine, snowballs or howlin' winds—why hell, ain't we night-trailed when it was so dark we had tuh strike matches tuh see a track? Easy? Give me somethin' hard then!"

Jamison's severe face cracked into a grin. "Well, I'm just tellin' yuh how other folks see it. 'Tain't my fault they don't know diff'rent."

"Better let 'em learn then—"

"Not much!" Jamison again became stern and unsmiling. "I take a heap of pride in my office—been tuh some trouble makin' th' reputation I have. I ain't turnin' it over till I know th' caliber of my successor."

Jimmy faced him with a taunting grin. "All right, go round up Mulligan Jack's killer—folk'll sure reelect yuh then."

"That's what we aim tuh do, kid."

"Hey?" Jimmy stared at him. "With Jack dead these six months? Hell, folks has forgot him by now an'—"

"Not much. There's gents ain't goin' tuh let 'em forget—not till after election. An' what if Jack has been dead for half a year? I've hit fresh sign—"

"Th' hell yuh say!"

Jamison nodded, fixing a stern eye on Jimmy. "Kid, I want yuh tuh go hunt up Tuck Huston. Most likely yuh'll find him up at th' hospital if his pard is much hurt. Bring him here."

Jimmy's mouth fell open. "M'gosh, yuh ain't suspectin' Tuck, are yuh, boss?"

"No, I ain't suspectin' Tuck—don't be such a damn fool. I just want tuh confab with him. He's a cool hand—an' observin'. I want him tuh give me his impressions of the expressions on Cadby's face this afternoon when all that doin's was takin' place."

"What for?"

"Never mind what for. Get goin'."

INFORMATION gleaned upon the streets led Jimmy's footsteps in the direction of Black Butte's large and only hospital. The crowds had not yet come up from the rodeo grounds, so there were but few people on the streets. He made a leisurely way toward the less inhabited section of the town, musing over his superior's words. A half block from the hospital he looked up. Tuck Huston appeared upon the broad, shaded veranda, turned back and paused in conversation with a white-uniformed nurse. Now certain of his quest, Jimmy's footsteps lagged still more as he again took up his musing.

Jimmy dropped instinctively to his hands and knees as a rifle cracked. By the same instinct his eyes were drawn to the hill facing the hospital. A puff of white smoke rose above the rimrock. Jimmy stared at it with a comical startled look. Then he became conscious of a scream from the vicinity of the veranda. A few long leaps carried him across the intervening space, disregarding the signs "keep off the grass," and over the railing. The sight that greeted his eyes was entirely unexpected. The nurse screamed again at Jimmy's precipitant arrival and dashed inside. Excited voices sounded from within, scurrying footsteps. Jimmy stared at the gruesome sight at his feet—Tuck Huston stretched out upon the veranda, lying in a growing pool of his own blood.

In a flash Jimmy became a hound of the law, quick thinking, capable. He started toward the steps when a white-coated doctor appeared in the doorway, a gun trembling in his hand, calling sharply to Jimmy to halt.

Jimmy paused long enough to flash his star and wave a hand toward the hill. "Th' shot come from up there, doc—you tend tuh Tuck!" With that he was off, drawing his six-shooter from his shoulder-holster and making a short dash for the little draw skirting the foot of the hill. The doctor, recognizing Jamison's deputy, dropped his weapon and bent over Huston. When Jimmy looked back from a quarter of a mile up the draw a stretcher had arrived and Huston was being carried into the hospital.

"God, I hope he didn't *get* Tuck," he panted, as he ran bent over up the draw. "Damn a cowardly ambusher—an' that white boy!"

Jimmy followed the draw to its head and continued circling the hill. It was covered with a thick mass of greasewood as high as a man's head, a scattering of boulders among them. The top of the hill was rockrimmed where the shot came from. As long as he kept to this lower covering, even if the rifleman still lingered, Jimmy knew he ran little chance of being seen. The only chance he had taken was gaining the draw. As this drew no lead he was given to believe the rifleman had fled.

Jimmy knew the other side of the hill rose in a gentler slope, giving him easier and safer ascent. Here too, a rough series of ridges, hogbacks, arose, step faced, giving his quarry a chance to escape before he could get sight of him. He scanned their bleak, deserted faces but nothing moving came within range of his vision. He rose cautiously from behind the screening growth of bushes and scanned the slope to the top of the hill. There was nothing to be seen.

"Too late!" he muttered.

Then Jimmy's eyes glued ahead. Throwing caution to the wind he ran forward to where a bush was pulled down and crushed. He studied for several minutes the trampled growth and earth. A horse had been tied here for some little time—and but a short time before. One of the crushed bushes was even then rising slowly.

"Hell, why didn't I bring a horse?"

In the absence of such a means of pursuit Jimmy decided to get all the evidence he could. He followed the tracks of the horse until he had a general idea of the direction he had gone. There was no further attempt at concealment, for he knew the rifleman was gone. He returned to the spot where the animal had been tied and looked for the tracks of his rider. Here, too, he was successful, for he found the marks of high-heeled boots that bit deep into the soft soil close to the bushes. Jimmy found a plain imprint and studied it for peculiarities. He did the same to the horse tracks, taking careful measurements of both. Jimmy was serving his apprenticeship under a man who never overlooked anything.

There might be a number of horses in and around Black Butte whose left hind foot turned slightly inward. The variation was so slight indeed that only a trained eye could detect it. For that reason it was hardly a clue. But a man with steel-plated boot heels riding such a horse, boot soles and hoofprints jibing with the measurements Jimmy had taken—well, that was pretty certain evidence.

Then Jimmy climbed the slope to its crest. Here again he took measurements, making certain the same boots had made the tracks here as down below. The same sized heel imprint, the same length of sole, with the heel steel plated. There could be no doubt.

A bright object caught his eye. Jimmy bent down and picked up an empty cartridge. Evidence? He had it here! Jimmy's eyes gleamed as he read the caliber. A forty-five-seventy wasn't rare, but neither were guns of that caliber numerous. Jimmy returned down the steep slope to put this evidence in his chief's hands as quickly as possible.

Sheriff Bat Jamison intercepted Jimmy in front of the hospital. "Tuck's hard hit but chances strong he'll pull through—th' doc's verdict," Jamison answered King's questioning look.

Jimmy drew a deep breath. "I'm glad." Then in an apologetic tone, "I didn't get 'im, Bat, but—I got some evidence." He handed Jamison the empty cartridge.

"Hm-m-m," muttered the sheriff, squinting at the butt end, "a forty-five-seventy firing slightly off center. Not numerous, kid. Gives us a lead."

"Then how about these?" Jimmy drew forth some sticks, twigs off greasewood, carefully and separately wrapped in his bandanna. Jimmy explained the measurement of each stick. "Left hind hoof turns slightly inward. Feller wore steel plates on his heels."

Jamison's eyes commenced to gleam. The regard he gave his deputy was not without admiration. But the sheriff's admission was gruff. "Kid, yuh're learnin'. Now maybe yuh can tell me who shot Tuck?"

But Jimmy was forced to shake his head. "I'm stumped, boss. I've tried tuh figger it out but it all ends th' same place. I don't know of an enemy Tuck's got in th' world. He's hell at puttin' up a job on a man but that don't usually bring on anything but a short-lived peeve—he's such a likeable cuss."

"Well, I know who done it." Jamison's tone was stern, confident. "Check up on these things yuh found—an' yuh won't have tuh check far. From what yuh say of them tracks leadin' back tuh them hogbacks I gotta hunch th' killer is right here in Black Butte now. He could circle 'em right back to th' north edge of town. Most likely he's ditched his rifle, but I can find out if he owns such a gun. Kid, I got a big surprise in store for you. Find Tuck's would-be killer an' I'll show yuh th' hombre that killed old Mulligan Jack."

Jimmy was quick witted. In spite of the way his superior had him guessing he recalled instantly Jamison's former suspicions. "Cadby!" he ejaculated incredulously. "Shoot Tuck because of *that!*"

Jamison, observing his deputy critically, laughed harshly. "Yuh're forgettin' things, kid," he reminded in a low voice. "Recall th' things that led up to it. A vicious, vindictive cuss, that Cadby. He deliberately jerked Tuck's sidekick among th' thrashin' hoofs of that outlaw. He abused that Tantalizer hoss for no reason at all. He's give his damn temper sway until he's at th' mercy of it. There ain't but one cure for him."

"What's that?"

"Death. A feller like that ain't no business on earth. And if yuh ask me, kid, that feller's got a record some'eres—wanted bad. Never heard of but one other just like 'im. 'Member Sid Champion?"

"Sid Champion? Well, I should smile! He killed if a feller just looked at him crosseyed—rather, that was th' tale. Folks used tuh scare their kiddies intuh bein' good by threatenin' Sid 'ud get 'em if they wasn't. Never met him, which I ain't none sorry. But he's been dead this long time."

"Ye-ah," drawled Jamison, a peculiar expression in his eyes that passed unnoticed by King. "Ye-ah, he's been dead for several years. Recollect th' circumstances of his death, kid?"

Jimmy answered promptly, wholly unsuspicious, "They run him intuh a river an' popped away until he sank."

"Too bad they never found his body," mused Jamison softly.

"Quicksand—the Box is noted for it."

Again Jamison flashed his deputy that peculiar look, hesitated, and abruptly changed the subject. Jimmy's nerve was unquestionable, but there was little use of putting too strong a test upon it. Often legend is more effective than actuality.

"All right, start checkin' up. If Cadby has got back yuh'll most likely find his hoss at th' Blue Front Livery Stable—that's where Nelson's men generally put up."

"Nelson? Does Cadby ride for him?"

Jamison nodded. "Called on me shortly after you left. Told me a heap of interestin' things. Troubled conscience—brought to a head after what happened down on th' grounds tuh-day. Nelson was a heap worked up—worried—an' pretty bad scared."

"About Cadby?"

"Of Cadby also. Kid, that just goes tuh

show a man don't want tuh overlook anything. I believed Nelson above suspicion —he is. I'm revertin' back tuh Mulligan Jack. But if we'd 'a' went after him he'd 'a' give us some leads that'd prevented all this an' woulda cleared up that case long ago. 'Tain't no use harpin' on what a mean ol' cuss Mulligan Jack was. Nelson was careless but on th' square. When Jack filed on some of th' Cross C meadowland that Nelson had neglected tuh make sure of, he bought Jack off, givin' him fifty dollars an acre. It was all settled peaceable with no argument on either side —Jack named his price an' Nelson paid it.

"Nelson was careless in another instance. Jack, as soon as he gets this money, runs an' files on a water hole that shuts th' Cross C off of some of their best summer range. Jack saw a steady income from this source an' refused tuh sell, so Craft agreed tuh pay him five hundred a year to let his cattle water there.

"This is all history passed several years since, Nelson claiming he'd always made his payments prompt up to this year. But a hitch to some business made him short on cash right at th' time he shoulda paid Mulligan Jack, an' never dreamin' but what th' delay of a few days 'ud be all right with Jack, he let it go without sayin' anything.

"It was just a little while before this Cadby went tuh ridin' for him, hittin' th' Cross C out of th' south, lookin' mighty gaunt and rode down. Nelson admitted th' feller reminded him of nothin' stronger than a hunted wolf, but good hands bein' scarce an' hard tuh get, an' Cadby provin' himself a topper, he said he had tuh take a chance on th' feller bein' all right.

"He put Cadby over on th' summer range where Mulligan Jack was located. Th' first intimation he had, Nelson said, that things wasn't sittin' right with Mulligan Jack was th' report of his riders that a heap of Cadby's herd was driftin' back down on th' river. That could mean but one thing. They wasn't gettin' water. An' th' fact they wasn't gettin' water meant Mulligan had shut off th' water hole.

"We was already in possession of th' rest of th' facts. It was Nelson found Mulligan Jack's body an' sent us in word. Th' gates was open an' cattle had free access to th' water. Apparently nothin' was wrong."

"But Nelson knew!"

"He suspected. Damn these old cowmen with their false codes. He knew th' meaning of them dry cattle. He told me tuh-day they found Cadby over in th' basin west of Mulligan Jack's, trailin' back a bunch of th' drifters. He denied th' gates had been shut or havin' seen anything of Mulligan Jack. So not knowin' definitely, an' lookin' on Cadby's play— if he did make th' play—in th' light of loyalty to th' outfit, Nelson didn't spill anything. He sure played his hand to perfection, 'cause he didn't give me a hint tuh suspect he knew more.

"But tuh-day he come clean. Cadby's exhibition this afternoon opened his eyes tuh th' real character of th' man he was halfway shieldin'. Th' rest is supposition, easy imagined. Mulligan Jack shut th' water off, which you can easy guess th' effect of on a man of Cadby's too evident caliber. It wasn't any sense of loyalty to th' outfit that caused him to blink Jack's lights. He proved that this afternoon even to Nelson's satisfaction.

"Now get goin', kid. Work as fast as yuh can. I have my own work—a beautiful little flush tuh play."

Jimmy needed no greater incentive to work fast. When Jamison boasted of such hands, you could bank on a big surprise. The sheriff had something of an unexpected nature up his sleeve, and Jimmy was craving to know what it was.

He went first to the Blue Front Livery Stable and there took the stable boy, a youthful admirer of his, to one side and confided his desires. Patty Henry was freckled faced and red headed and bright as a new molded dollar. And because he was ambitious he was entirely trustworthy. Jimmy was his idol and his model. The low confidential tone of the deputy was enough to convince the youth that here was a matter requiring the highest degree of secrecy.

In a still lower whisper Patty informed him the rider Jimmy described had ridden in not fifteen minutes ago, and that his horse was standing in the last stall. Together they went to the back of the stable to the stall designated. Jimmy studied the horse for a few minutes, whistling softly. Then he asked Patty if he would lead the horse out in the corral at the rear, where the water trough stood.

There in the damp sand fronting the watering trough Jimmy got a perfect imprint of the horse's hoofs. Again the carefully handled sticks were brought into use. Jimmy rose to his feet and grinned up into the interested face of his useful watcher where he sat upon the top rail of the corral, swinging the end of the lead rope idly.

"All right, you can take him back now, Pat—an' say nothin'."

The youth bobbed his head with a wise wink and scrambled down off the fence. Jimmy caught his hand and wrung it fervently. "Pat, just be patient. I'm goin' tuh recommend yuh tuh Bat in th' near future. If he don't make a deputy of yuh—well, maybe I'll get tuh be sheriff some day."

Instead of returning by way of the front, Jimmy went out the back gate, gained a side street through an alley and turned down the main street again in the direction of the most frequented saloon, the Stag. A hum of voices and hilarious yells issued from its open doors. Jimmy entered as inconspicuously as possible and scanned the faces lined three deep at the bar. But the face he sought was not among them. Then he bethought himself of the lunch counter in the rear and made his way in that direction.

Cadby was there, seated upon one of the high stools, the high heels of his boots hooked in the rounds, wolfing a huge T-bone steak. Jimmy wandered to the rear leisurely, bending over as if to pick something off the floor as he came opposite Cadby. His eyes darted to the boot heels.

"ALL right, Bat, I've checked up an' everything fits." That was Jimmy's greeting as he entered the sheriff's office with a triumphant grin, three quarters of an hour after he and his superior had parted company before the hospital. It was growing dusk and Jimmy was unable to see the expression upon Jamison's face as he made answer:

"Good work, kid. It wasn't just necessary, but I wanted tuh get rid of yuh while I made my own preparations. See Cadby?"

"Yep, at th' Stag feedin' his face."

"Good!" Jamison took down the receiver and called a number.

"The Stag?" he questioned over the phone. "There's a feller eatin' at yuhr counter by name of Cadby. Call him to th' phone, will yuh?" A few minutes later, "Hello, Cadby? This is Sheriff Jamison talkin'. Through feedin'? Yuh are. All right, come up tuh th' office. I want tuh hear an explanation of yuhr actions down on th' grounds this afternoon. No, I ain't referrin' to th' hoss—I aim tuh get clear about Crimp Jones gettin' bunged up. A accident? We-ell, maybe. But folks is talkin'. I want tuh hear yuhr side. Yuh'll come up, then? All right."

Jamison hung up with a grim smile. Jimmy could not control an ejaculation, "My gosh, yuh'll scare th' bird away!"

"Not if I know my man. Use a little diplomacy with fellers of Cadby's caliber, kid. If yuh can bring 'em to yuh instead of goin' after 'em—well, there's less chance for casualties."

A disturbance outside distracted Jimmy for the time. He swung to the door and peered outside into the growing dusk. In the vacant lot adjoining the jail he made out the dim outlines of a horse tied to the railing. Something familiar in the actions of the horse caused him to step from the door and advance closer. A minute later he was back in the office, breathless.

"My gosh, Bat, what's Tantalizer doin' out there?"

"Part of my stunt, kid. Just a little test—"

The rapid tramp of footsteps on the sidewalk interrupted the sheriff. Jimmy looked around expectantly, only to be instantly disappointed.

"Yuh come almost too late, Nelson," Jamison motioned the newcomer to a chair.

"I got yuhr man on th' phone—he sh'd be here most any minute."

Other steps sounded; the familiar click of steel-plated boot heels upon the cement. Cadby paused in the doorway and took a quick look inside. The presence of his employer seemed to reassure him. He stepped inside.

Jamison had turned to his desk and appeared to be perusing some papers, seemingly unaware of the new arrival. Jimmy stared first at Cadby, then at his superior, marveling at the latter's action.

"Now, Sheriff, yuh don't reckon that kid, Jones, was hurt through any fault of mine," commenced the new arrival in a protesting voice. "Th' damn fool rushed me—"

Jamison whirled his chair about with a hearty hail, "Why, hello there, Sid Champion!" Jimmy could utter nothing but a smothered gasp. Nelson's eyes protruded and his mouth dropped open. Cadby was no less stunned by the bombshell. Before any of them could recover Jamison rushed on:

"Not altogether about Crimp, Sid. I just wanted tuh tell yuh I know you killed Mulligan Jack—not so bad. But shootin' Tuck Huston—that was bad, Sid. Too much in line with yuhr past killin's—"

An animal-like snarl escaped the cowboy's lips. "Where'd yuh get that name?"

"Sid Champion? I never believed yuh was killed in th' Box. 'Course th' sand coulda swallowed yuh. But even that didn't sound reasonable-like. I once knew a feller floated under water for more'n a mile, breathin' through a reed. A desperate man might do better. But how'd I know yuh tuh be Sid Champion? By yuhr ridin'. Sid Champion never had an equal—had a style all his own. It puzzled me for a time—I watched yuh close every day yuh rode—I knowed I'd seen yuh ride some'eres b'fore? But where? At Cheyenne! Yuh pulled some like stunt down there—a hoss lashed out at yuh—"

There was a muttered oath, and the quick flash of a hand. Champion, alias Cadby, had heard enough. Apparently he had been unarmed—no guns were visible. But a gun appeared in his hand as if by magic, staring Jamison between the eyes. Jamison might have lost some of his ruddy coloring, but he never batted an eye.

"Yuh're a smart sheriff, ain't yuh?"

"Smart enough tuh be a sheriff," retorted Jamison calmly. He was a cool customer even when death stared him in the face. "Better put that gun up, Sid, until yuh hear my proposition."

The rough rider chuckled as at a joke. He leered at Jamison, blood flecks in his black eyes, lips drawn to thin lines.

"My guns are on th' wall."

"I ain't a fool 'cause you are."

"That's what I banked on—you ain't a fool, Sid. That's why I put my guns out of my reach. I'm goin' tuh give yuh a chance, Sid—something you ain't often given yuhr victims. Kill me an' you won't get it. My deputy standin' there is wearin' his gun. He ain't slow on th' draw, not Jimmy King. Get me an' he'll get you sure as hell."

Jamison paused to let this soak in. Then he continued in the same steady tone, "Take th' chance I offer yuh, Sid, an' yuh might get clear. Outside is a horse tied to th' hitch-rack adjoinin' this buildin'. Put up yuhr gun an' I guarantee yuh safe exit an' two minutes tuh gain that hoss."

Champion did not put up his gun. But his straining ears caught the snorting and stamping of a restless animal, and he knew Jamison spoke the truth in this respect at least. Likewise his first words were sensible. Champion knew something of Jimmy King's record with a gun. He started retreating, slowly keeping his gun trained on the sheriff. At the door he paused.

"I'm takin' yuhr word, Sheriff. I won't kill yuh—*now*. But if any of yuh make a break—"

The unfinished threat and the venom with which it was spoken was ominous enough. Champion leaped back and slammed the door shut. Jimmy, in the act of leaping in pursuit, was caught and flung back by the sheriff.

"To th' window!" yelped Jamison. "An' no shootin', Jim—not till I say!"

The three crowded to the window to

witness a spectacle that was not entirely clear in the growing darkness: a snort and scurry of hoofs; a figure vaulting into the saddle indistinctly seen. Then came a squeal of rage and a startled curse, the sight of a distorted outline ascending skyward and a trembling of the building at the awful contact of the descent. There followed the dull thud of a body.

Did Tantalizer know? Did he recognize his rider by scent? Did he remember that afternoon just past?

There was a sickening crush of bones and yielding flesh. Four sharp hoofs rose and fell again and again, accompanied by shrill whistling, the signal of a horse gone mad with blood lust.

Three faces drew back, pale and sick at what they could imagine was taking place. The thunder of hoofs sounded past the jail and retreated up the street. Jamison flung open the door and ran out, the other two at his heels.

Together they stood staring down at the mangled form of what had once been Sid Champion—now the victim of his own passions—the badman whose name people had used to frighten their children into being good, a conscienceless and habitual killer.

Jamison turned away, shaking his head in contrition. "He had it comin'—but I didn't look for this. I thought th' hoss would bust him—Sid not expectin' it—an' all we'd have tuh do was run out an' gather him in 'fore he got over his daze. But Tantalizer—he done took things in his own hands an' squared accounts."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

TWO BIRDS WITH MISS STONE

Another Romeo Ragan Yarn

By

BUD JONES

There ain't a dull moment in a carload of these yarns

THE UTAH THUNDERBOLT

A COMPLETE WESTERN NOVEL

By W. D. Hoffman

Zack Farrar throws a roaring six-gun challenge to Tricks Jerome and his outlaw band.

CHAPTER I

The Trail to Soledad

“THAT air jerkline buckaroo is shore lettin' hisself in for a heap o' trouble,” drawled old Lige Hollister as he pointed with his pipe-stem toward the cowboy guard who accompanied the ore train as the wagons rumbled out of Golden on the Soledad trail.

He expressed the sentiment of the camp. One lone puncher as the armed protector of the freighter caravan seemed preposterous in view of the fate of other wagons.

“We'll starve to death if we count on his empties bringin' back supplies,” commented another spectator. He referred to the other task of the lone guard—that of returning later from Soledad with provisions for the camp. For weeks every supply train had been destroyed by the road agents. Golden, in a desolate waste, shipped in by team everything it ate except meat.

Dust rose in a cloud from the hoofs of the seven span and the stout iron rims of the high wheels of the ore wagons. Blucher, the driver, astride the near wheel-horse, cracked his blacksnake whip and manipulated the long jerkline that guided the team's leaders. Beside him on a cow-pony rode the guard, Zack Farrar.

A curious crowd watched the departure of the freighter, among them Sheriff Bill Bishop, a scowling, heavy-jowled personage whose shifty eye would make a stranger suspect him rather as a lawbreaker than a law-enforcer.

“Yeppy,” went on old Lige Hollister, “he's shorely stickin' his nose into a ruckus, invitin' the Thunderbolt to pounce down on the ore train again. He'll make the third that the outlaws has killed in three weeks.”

“Ain't no danger,” grunted the sheriff. “Thunderbolt has skipped the country.”

Old Lige laughed sourly. He was the only man in Golden who did not hesitate to ridicule the law officer. “I reckon the

Thunderbolt an' his robber crew skipped the kentry when they heerd about you, Sheriff?" he queried, sarcastically. "Scairt they'd be arrested, mebbe! Yeah, them robbers have skipped the kentry. Uh-huh—uh-huh. They'd skip quicker, Sheriff, if you'd resign and quit these here fake man-hunts—"

"Who is that puncher?" broke in Deming Carr, a cowman from the Three V's Ranch near Golden. He had taken this means of breaking up a tense situation, for Sheriff Bill Bishop was getting ugly as a result of the old man's banter.

"He's a fool from Utah," snapped Bishop. "He's tryin' to play hero by actin' as guard of the wagons and refusin' to take any other armed men with him. It would serve him right if he run into the hold-ups and got drilled. But the outlaws has skipped—"

"Uh-huh—I don't think!" grunted the old-timer.

"He's g'aranteed safe delivery of the bullion, I heard the colonel say this mornin'," broke in a bystander. "Seems like he's got a grudge ag'inst this so-called Thunderbolt—personal. Wants to meet up with them outlaws. From what the colonel says, this jerkline buckaroo is a quick draw artist hisself. So the colonel's givin' him a trial."

"Shorely," put in Lige Hollister. "The colonel knows he would never ketch these hold-ups if he waits till the sheriff grabs 'em! Hello, there goes that other stranger trailin' the ore waggins!" Again he tipped the pipe-stem toward the dust-cloud near the end of the long street.

A horseman was traveling in the wake of the ore train. No one knew much about this man except that he had come into Golden during the week, giving the name of Bert DeWees.

Meanwhile the driver and the lone guard were moving slowly outward toward the desert. Three hours' travel beyond them was the pass of the Pinnacles where a guard and a driver had been shot to death within the month.

It was morning of mid-July, in the barren high mesa country skirting the Mineral Hills of Arizona, within sight of the towering purple ranges of Utah. The usual turquoise sky was overcast with leaden clouds that promised rain and gave relief from the torrid sun. The ore train custodians were trusting to luck and good judgment to get their shipment through against the hazard of washouts and thieves. The rains of this season were particularly sudden and torrential and frequently made the Soledad trail impassable.

Good judgment on the part of both men was the primary factor here now—on the part of the driver to find his way even if a cloudburst ripped the ore road to pieces—on the part of the guard to fight the train through if molested. Tug Blucher, the driver, was an experienced freighter of fifty years, grizzled and ripe in experience. The guard, though much younger, would have commanded notice anywhere.

He was not punching cattle now, nor had he followed this vocation for more than a year. Yet he was in a stockman's saddle and his roan was a cow-pony. He would have been taken for a range rider on any outfit east of the California line. His sombrero was that of a puncher, wide almost to his broad shoulders. He wore no chaps, for the country was open. His boots were spurred, though his mode of travel alongside the slow-moving ore train made the roweled appurtenances seem unnecessary. Zack Farrar was ready for a chase, if necessary. A six-shooter jutted from his belt holster and a Winchester carbine was in a saddle scabbard under his knee.

There was an air of mystery about Farrar. Colonel Eaton of the Golden Ingot Mines had had one of his hunches that he was hiring no ordinary cowpuncher when he took the young rider on as guard. The buckaroo from Utah had made a very persuasive talk in favor of guarding this latest shipment alone, pledging that the bullion would arrive safely in Soledad.

"Good on the shoot, you say?"

"Good enough."

"Well, I'm hiring you," the colonel had decided. "It's hard to get anybody to go with the stuff since these last killings. You say you have a personal reason for wanting to see the shipment through?"

Farrar had nodded. "A certain one of these coyotes—I believe he's the Thunderbolt himself, killed a friend of mine over in Utah." He did not enlighten the colonel further.

Thus it had been arranged.

Now Zack Farrar watched the stranger on horseback moving behind the wagon train. The street had disappeared in the sand ruts of the mesa. Dusty and barren, the town of Golden receded slowly on the east slope of the Mineral Hills, and still the rider in the trail of the train hung behind.

Thirty-five miles of sand, black lava, cactus and mesquite reached outward from the Minerals to the nearest outpost of civilization, Soledad, county seat of Weston County. Another forty miles through the less barren valley of Plover River marked the end of the old ore trail to Smeltersville.

Golden had slept for a dozen years or more until, within the year, a new strike in the workings of the Ingot had brought a revival. With it came again the crack of the freighter's whip, the rumble of heavy wagons, the flip of the long jerkline. Twelve and fourteen horses sweated and tugged at the traces to haul the lowgrade to the smelter and the free-milling bullion to the assayer's office. From the Minerals to civilization there had never been a railroad.

"Friend o' yourn?" queried Tug Blucher, turning his shaggy head slightly to indicate the man in the rear.

Farrar replied in the negative. He had never seen the stranger, whose facial features were angular and gaunt and whose nose had a crook near the bridge. The guard had debated whether to turn his mount back toward the fellow and demand his purpose in following the ore train in such an uncommunicative fashion.

He decided to await developments. The presence of this man spelled possible trickery on the part of the Utah killer whom Farrar had come here to get. "Tricks" Jerome, the notorious outlaw of the Yellow Basin country, was given to surprises. This rider might be one of his men.

The lone guard drew from his pocket a folded letter and scanned its contents for the third time. This communication had been addressed to him at Golden. It was both a challenge and a threat:

> Zack Farrar,
> Golden, Ariz.
>
> Well, well hear we are agin—me an the Thunderbolt Kid lookin out danged sharp of each uther. Go to it, but if your wize youell hit back for home!!! But if you figger to stick, why I advise you to play a lone hand because Im goin to pick off any buddy that you git to jine you in the manhunt—do you savvy that? I aim to pick em off like I done to your buddy Bill Teasdale. Now watch out for my big serprize play!!!
>
> TRICKS

The eyes of the guard contracted at the reading. There was no doubt of the outlaw's crafty meaning. Instead of making a direct threat against the life of his pursuer — a threat that would be taken for granted, anyway — he promised to shoot any companion of Farrar. This is exactly what he had done in the case of Deputy Sheriff Bill Teasdale of Yellow Basin, Utah. He had not even waited for Farrar and Teasdale to be together before he had executed a like threat there. Now he was using the same club over the cowboy officer's head, knowing Farrar would not want to risk the life of any companion on the man-hunt.

But this was not the only reason the guard had engineered things in coming with the shipment alone. He preferred to meet Tricks Jerome in person, in equal combat, and he was willing to risk encountering others of the killer's band if this one thing could be accomplished in the end.

As for Blucher, Farrar was certain the outlaw would not deem him a fellow manhunter, since he was the regular driver of the ore train. At the same time, Jerome would not hesitate to slay both Blucher and his pursuer, if by so doing he could rob the ore train of its bullion.

The cowboy's attention had not been taken from the gaunt rider, DeWees. The man had been gaining slowly on the freighter outfit and a meeting would not long be delayed. At this juncture the stranger looked behind him for a long moment, then suddenly loped up past the two wagons toward Farrar.

CHAPTER II

A REJECTED PROPOSITION

BERT DEWEES, as he had named himself, did not appear more favorable to Farrar as he drew nearer, his muddy eyes in particular registering both craftiness and cruelty. He was unarmed, at least so far as outward appearances went.

"Howdy," he greeted, ironically.

"Howdy." The young guard eyed him steadily. He was sure now he had never seen DeWees before.

The stranger's thin lips curled back in a grin. "I'd like to see yuh personal," he declared, glancing meaningly toward Blucher.

Zack Farrar stepped his mount back along the trailer wagon.

"Thunderbolt huntin' the Thunderbolt?" chuckled the stranger.

"Mayhap."

DeWees shrugged. "Admit yo're the Thunderbolt, guardin' the colonel's bullion, don't yuh?"

"State yore business," advised the guard, grimly.

"I'll do that little thing—quick." DeWees grinned again. "I don't reckon yo'll mistake me for an officer come to arrest yuh, Farrar! I ain't of that breed! To show yuh I know some things I'll talk brief. Yo're the real and only genuwine Thunderbolt—from Utah. This gent yo're huntin' ain't no more the Thunderbolt than I am. He's plain Tricks Jerome, the killer. That keyrect?"

Zack Farrar was surprised, in spite of the fact that he had put DeWees down as a suspicious character, one who probably was a member of Jerome's band. It was indeed news that DeWees should know exactly what Farrar was doing here.

"Yo're actin' as guard figgerin' to take Tricks Jerome when he tries to grab the bullion," went on the stranger. "Over the Arizona line yo're known as Thunderbolt Zack Farrar, fightin' deputy sheriff of Yella Basin County. That keyrect?"

"Go on," said the guard, evenly.

"That bein' the case, it was pretty slick of Tricks to have the boys call him the Thunderbolt when he stuck up the freighter that first time, eh? He figgered the whole country would hear that the Thunderbolt was pullin' these robberies. When they found out you was the genuwine Thunderbolt—you not darin' to admit to that nickname sence these robberies happened—well, when folks found out you was the Thunderbolt, Tricks figgered it would be pretty hot for yuh around here, Farrar!"

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh! Pretty slick of Tricks to stack the deck thataway! Now there's two Thunderbolts, one of 'em an officer and the other a outlaw. But folks here don't know the difference. It would take two weeks to get a letter through to Utah and back and there ain't no telegraph offices in this neck o' the woods, either. Besides, you bein' only a deputy sheriff means you ain't got authority to extradite Tricks out of Arizona. That's why I don't reckon yo're wearin' yore badge. Yo're makin' this man-hunt a private matter, I reckon, Farrar, because Tricks Jerome beat yore deputy friend, Bill Teasdale, to the draw!"

"Go on," said the guard meaningly.

"Now here's the lay: There's twenty thousand dollars' bullion hid out among the lowgrade in that front wagon. Tricks and his bunch figgers on gatherin' it in. Now supposin' you and me split on that twenty thousand—me ridin' ahead and pretendin' to grab the drop off uh you and helpin' myself to the yella stuff. Me and you would divide her later—fifty-fifty—and Tricks wouldn't get a smell!"

"Sounds nice," said Farrar, scornfully. "That all you've got to say?"

The eyes of the outlaw contracted swiftly. "Yuh won't do it, eh?"

"No," said the guard."

"What would yuh give if I told yuh

where you could lay yore hands on Tricks Jerome?" countered the renegade.

"Not a thing."

The stranger scowled. "That yore final answer?"

"Yep."

"Then I'll tell yuh something! Tricks has got a beaut of a trap set for yuh, Farrar! He's shore goin' to get yuh if yuh stick on this freighter train! He knows yo're here. Fact is, he sent me here as a messenger to tell yuh he knows yore every move. He's got a dozen fightin' rannies with him, and he sent me here to warn yuh to quit this guard job while the quittin' is good. He's askin' yuh to go back to Utah while the offer is open!"

"Kind of him. That all he's askin'?" drawled the cowboy guard.

"That's the whole damned works."

"So you came here tryin' to get me to lay down on this job so you could rob the train and even double-cross yore boss, eh?" mused Farrar.

"Money talks with me like it does with Tricks, Farrar."

Blucher had halted the team and the cowboy guard called to him now. "Hold the outfit here a spell, Tug. I'm takin' this gent back to town to turn him over to the sheriff."

Bert DeWees leaned forward quickly in the saddle and his hand snatched forth a revolver from his right hip pocket.

CHAPTER III

A Blur of Motion

THUNDERBOLT ZACK FARRAR saw the gun coming from its concealment. He seemed to be not at all concerned; the expression of his enigmatic features did not change.

That DeWees should produce a weapon in this fashion, when he wore no belt or holster, was not wholly a surprise to the guard, who had learned to mistrust the stranger from the start. So far as the draw itself was concerned, Zack Farrar would have the advantage if it were attempted by both at the same instant, for the reason that DeWees was compelled to reach behind. But the jerkline buckaroo had not acted instantly when he had seen DeWees' hand flash to his hip. He had actually let part of a second elapse before he stirred at all.

It was when the outlaw lieutenant had laid hand and fingers about the handle of the concealed weapon and was yanking it forth that the Thunderbolt acted.

A mere blur of motion from the guard's elbow down would have been noted by a keen-eyed spectator, and perhaps Bert DeWees himself caught this vague hint of action to come.

At any rate, there ensued a trace of time in which the cowboy deputy was absolutely still in every muscle, his forearm crooked at right angles to his body. In his hand, likewise unmoving, was the leveled forty-five that an instant before had been in its leather sheath. But the pause was only for a space so brief that DeWees' eyes did not record the fact that he was covered.

Perhaps sheer desperation drove the outlaw on, now that he had made the first hostile move. The lean guard in the saddle had given him his opportunity to stay the draw he was attempting. DeWees did not profit by it.

The man's eyes were savage and malignant and he did not pause in the frantic forward sweep of his weapon. Zack Farrar saw the gun come upward from the hip and he saw the barrel tilting. All of this occurred in the part of a second, yet a slow motion camera would have shown how completely the outlaw was at the mercy of the man who had stolen the drop before the other realized it. DeWees' gun was jumping to the kill.

The Thunderbolt struck. The roar of a six-shooter was trailed by a thin wisp of smoke and the leaden .45 caliber slug went home. Farrar might as easily have put the missile through the other's heart, and circumstances would have justified the act, but such punishment was not necessary. The renegade was minus a thumb; the weapon he had tried to conceal was hurtling backward against the hip of his horse and to the ground.

The face of the gaunt rider was a picture of mingled amazement and rage. He should have known better, for Tricks Jerome, the man he was serving, had warned him that Farrar was not only dangerous but matchless in the use of the forty-five.

Dreaded by the rustlers and horse thieves of his native range after numerous gunfights, running or standing to the duel, Farrar had earned his moniker, the "Thunderbolt" in the years before he had been coaxed from his vocation of punching cows to become a deputy sheriff. He had won his fame before he had become an officer and that fame had given him the deputyship.

"You've got a bad hand," informed the buckaroo pleasantly. "Next time, I'd advise you to look before you shoot." With a deft twist of his handkerchief, Farrar tied a taut knot above the injured portion of the hand to check the bleeding. "Now we'll be movin'." He picked up DeWees' gun and thrust it in his pocket, then called to Tug Blucher to kill time until he could ride the short distance back into town with the prisoner.

Ten minutes later the freighter guard loped up to the office of Sheriff Bishop of Golden with his captive. Bishop, florid of face and loud-mouthed, demanded to know on what authority a special officer of the mining company was arresting men on any charge not pertaining to ore train robbery.

The cowboy did not lose his temper. "Only a precaution," he drawled. "Get his hand fixed up and turn him loose if you want to. I brought him in *to try you out, Sheriff.*"

"Try me out? Whad you mean?" growled the officer.

"He's one of this hold-up bunch. I reckon you know it. Now turn him loose if you want to." Zack Farrar mounted and rode again to overtake the freighter.

Presently he rejoined Blucher, who had moved slowly ahead on the high mesa. No interference with the ore and bullion shipment was expected here where the view was unobscured for miles.

As Farrar came up, the driver, from his place on the near wheel-horse, jerked the single line that reached to the leader on the same side of the seven span. The lone strand of leather reached from Blucher's right hand to the forward near horse's bit, for only by a jerkline could the fourteen-horse team be managed. The jockey stick shoved against the off-side leader's mouthpiece and the team turned slightly to the right. The heavily-laden wagons creaked and crunched as the wheels ground into the stony surface of the mesa trail.

"Did ye hurt that hombre much?" queried Blucher, after a time. "I was 'stonished when he went for his gun."

The younger man gave a brief recital of the encounter and told of the sheriff's ugly mood toward the outlaw's captor.

"Colonel knows he can't trust the sheriff none—far as these hold-ups is concerned," remarked the freighter. "He'll turn DeWees loose, is my opinion."

"I suspect he will."

The pair continued in silence. Limestone and alkali dust rose in a cloud behind the horses, until the guard's gray cotton shirt, open leather vest, black trousers, studded gauntlets, hat and boots were alike coated with the whitish dust, as was the garb of Blucher, the two wagons and the horses.

"Comp'ny puts a powerful store by ye, Farrar," Tug commented, after a time. "Colonel allus sent more'n one guard up hyar since them shootin's—till this time. Ye axed to ride on guard alone, all by yereself, I hear?"

The one known over the Utah line as the Thunderbolt nodded. He did not mention Tricks Jerome. Except for DeWees and the others of the renegades, no one here knew the real name of the outlaw who had taken the Thunderbolt's name. It would be well to keep this knowledge from the freighter and all others until later.

"Never seen anybody git into the shoot quicker'n ye done, son," resumed Blucher. "Ye know, I taken a powerful likin' to ye, Farrar. Is it true about that josh I heerd in town this marnin' — about that gel?"

"What girl?" demanded Farrar, quickly.

"George Verdin's girl. Miz Jessie, that owns the hoss ranch?"

"Well?" said the Thunderbolt, grimly.

"Wal, Stew Gates come into town this mawnin' laughin'. Thought I better mention what I heerd, Farrar. Stew says as how he was behint the feed box in the hoss corral an' heerd ye axin' Miz Jessie to marry ye."

The cowboy's cheeks flushed scarlet, in mingled exasperation and chagrin. The freighter went on:

"Stew says as how he heerd her tellin' ye she was already marriet. 'When a feller goes a-sparkin'' says Stew, 'he orta find out if the gel is marriet fust.' Is that a danged lie or ain't it?"

The guard did not reply, not wanting to deny or assent to this tale of Stew Gates, which was nearer the truth than he dared admit. He wanted to forget all about Jessie Verdin forever.

Time fled and two hours' travel put the level mesa behind the ore train. Here the rolling foothills of the Ruby Range were encountered and the wagons entered a wide arroyo. Fortunately no rain had yet fallen and the danger of a blocked train from washouts was minimized. The arroyo trail was five miles shorter than the desert route, so long as it was dry and passable.

Now Tug Blucher took his rifle from his saddle scabbard. "Three mile ahead is whar Jeff Heber was shot down," informed the grizzled freighter.

The guard smiled. But there was no laughter in the level gray eyes that scanned the trail ahead. He too took up his long range weapon, the carbine, turned the gun at an easy angle aslant of his lean, muscular forearm.

Tug Blucher cracked his whip to urge the horses to greater effort where the arroyo grade had steepened. Suddenly he emitted a prolonged "Whoa!" and halted the team.

"Spreader chain's draggin' up near the lead," he muttered and left the saddled wheel-horse to investigate. The cowboy guard rode alongside to lend a hand.

"Better'nt ye stay with the wagons?" suggested Blucher. "Might be somebody will creep up along the arroyo bank if we both git too far away."

"I'd like 'em to make the try," said Farrar, with a drawl.

"Powerful big lot of the yalla stuff in one of them wagons," reminded the freighter.

The guard was aware of the nature of the shipment from what the colonel had told him. Both of the freighter wagons were alike, four-foot front wheels, five-foot back, with huge boxed bodies, outflaring toward the top, the floor of the beds smaller than the top circumference. Big chunks of Golden Ingot ore for the smelter were heaped upward over the horizontal planking, held in place by the oaken two-by-twos.

It was not this low grade ore that the raiders sought, the Thunderbolt knew. Somewhere in one of those sturdy wagons was hidden the most valuable part of the cargo—two iron-banded oak boxes containing glistening yellow bars from the Ingot. The chief of the mines of the Golden district were free-milling and these ores were hammered into slime by the crushers and stamps, the precious metal extracted and rendered into bars at the retort house. The ores for the smelter, while valuable, held no lure to hold-ups except that they hid the whereabouts of the bullion buried in the low grade.

The freighter was cussing roundly at the discovery that the spreader chain had been completely broken behind the span next to the leaders. He took up the severed link, stepped back from the horses puzzling over a way to mend the broken piece. Suddenly he dropped the chain and stared at the rock wall of the arroyo with bulging eyes.

He walked slowly over to a point in the embankment where a printed poster had recently been fastened against the decomposed granite. He glanced at Farrar. "Is that yer picture?" he asked huskily.

The guard had moved his roan horse closer to the notice, which read as follows:

REWARD! REWARD!

$10,000 cash reward! For the capture dead or alive of Zack Farrar, gunman and killer, known in Northern Utah as the Thunderbolt. The above sum will be paid by the county of Yellow Basin and the state of Utah combined: Description: Five feet ten, weight about 145; age 28; hair light; eyes gray; features even; rarely smiles; wears cowboy garb; last seen riding swift roan pony.

WARNING!

Officers and individuals warned the Thunderbolt is a desperate man, quick to kill, fast and ferocious with six-shooter and rifle alike. Advisable to shoot him on sight, as he has escaped and slain his captors twice before.

(Signed) NATHAN FRENCH,
Governor of Utah.

The features of the slim man in the saddle did not change as he read the notice. His level gray eyes went to Tug Blucher as the veteran freighter scanned his countenance in puzzlement and amazement. In the center of the placard was a picture of the Thunderbolt, and the photograph was identical with the features of the guard.

Bert DeWees' threat was being carried out in a startling manner. This, the jerkline guard knew, was the work of Tricks Jerome—the trap of which the notorious killer's lieutenant had spoken!

Tug Blucher's eyes dropped and he swallowed hard. He did not say more, but his manner had told that he suspected the freighter guard.

CHAPTER IV

BLUCHER IS PUZZLED

NOR did Zack Farrar speak. He reached over from the saddle, quickly pulled the poster from the soft rock of the embankment and folded it into a three-inch square. Then he tucked the paper into the inside pocket of his vest.

His first thought was not of the freighter and the impression this startling bit of information would have on the loyal employee. He was thinking of Colonel Sam Eaton, the man who had hired him to see this cargo of bullion through. What would the colonel say or do when he, too, saw one of these reward notices? It was certain more than one placard had been printed, and if this isolated arroyo contained one of them, others would be posted in Golden and at other points in Northern Arizona.

Colonel Eaton would be amazed when he discovered that the cowboy he had entrusted with twenty thousand dollars in gold was a man with a price on his head. He would very probably believe that Farrar had tricked him in asking to see the gold through, as the one lone guard. Possibly even now the mine owner was sending men in pursuit.

The eyes of the Thunderbolt narrowed as he considered how the poster had come to be put up here in this desolate spot. There was but one conclusion. Tricks Jerome, the killer, murderer of Deputy Sheriff Teasdale, had outwitted the Thunderbolt in seeing to it that the wilderness was placarded with this "shoot on sight" injunction. Jerome was given to such cunning, hence the nickname he bore.

To the cowboy no further proof was needed that Tricks was in the immediate neighborhood. There was not even a coating of alkali dust on the poster, showing that it had been placed here within a few hours.

Not until Tug Blucher stood his rifle against the arroyo wall did it occur to the jerkline guard that the freighter might have been debating his chances of capturing the Thunderbolt—possibly shooting the buckaroo to collect that large reward!

Farrar glanced at the driver as the rifle left Blucher's hand. The act was meaningful. It served notice on the dreaded gunfighter that Tug was in no mood to try a capture.

"Reckon you can fix that chain?" queried the cowboy, easily.

Blucher stammered something about being a fool for not carrying an extra chain with him. "This is the fust time I was ever ketched without havin' even an open link with me," he muttered.

"Got a clevis you can hook to the doubletree?" queried the guard.

"Nope," said the freighter thoughtfully. "But I might rig things up by knottin' the chain." He set to work, his eyes averted from his companion. By throwing the links around the doubletree and knotting them, he made a fastener for the main tug chain that reached from the lead span to the first of the wagons. Then he took up his rifle and started back to resume his place on the near wheel-horse. The guard went with him.

With extreme care the driver replaced his rifle in the saddle holster, as though again to give notice to the Thunderbolt that he did not intend to try for the ten thousand dollar reward. He cracked his blacksnake whip and the fourteen horses strained at the tugs. The long chain tautened from the leaders down and the heavy ore wagon and trailer moved upward.

The grizzled driver tautened the long jerkline and the leaders turned to the left where the wash bent at an angle toward the highest of two reddish porphyry hills. With his whip he guided the off wheelhorse sharply to the right; the wagon tongue pulled the front wheels clear of a boulder in the trail. When all wheels had cleared the obstruction the skillful driver shouted another "Whoa-a!"

Tug Blucher turned to the younger man in the saddle and his features were hard as rock. "Whar will this hold-up be pulled?" he asked, grimly.

"I'd like mighty well to know."

"Don't you know?" The freighter's jaw was outthrust.

"No."

Tug Blucher gnawed off a bite of plug, matching the guard's steady gaze. "I'll tell ye, Farrar. I ain't takin' up my rifle. That air reward don't appeal to me. I'm loyal to them that pays my wages—but, hell, I don't crave to be shot down in cold blood. If yer friends is over thar in the hills waitin' to rob the train, I'm axin' ye not to kill me. Take the bullion."

The guard did not smile. "That poster is a lie, Tug."

The freighter's jaw hardened. "Ain't that yer picture? I recollect yer name as give to me by the comp'ny is Zack Farrar, too. Besides, that photegraph is your'n. Airn't ye the Thunderbolt?"

For a moment the guard hesitated. After due deliberation he decided he could not hide all. "I'm not denyin' the description, hair, eyes, height and all—right even to my horse. I reckon the photograph is mine, too. I'm Zack Farrar. Far as the Thunderbolt goes, that name was glued to me ever since a certain gunfight I was mixed up in—over the Utah line. Yep, they've got the right man—far as the details about me go. But it's a lie that I'm wanted by the governor or the sheriff."

"I'm mighty glad ye ain't wanted up thar," asserted Tug Blucher, in tones that told he was not thoroughly convinced. "But what'll the colonel think if he sees them posters, Farrar?"

Colonel Eaton would undoubtedly take steps to protect himself and the gold. The Thunderbolt realized his predicament fully. If Golden, Soledad and other outlying hamlets were placarded with those notices it would mean that scores of men would be on the lookout for him. Among these there would be more than one who would not hesitate to shoot him down from under cover, lured by the large offer of reward as well as believing they were ridding the community of a highly obnoxious criminal.

But Zack Farrar intended to see this shipment through the bandit zone, regardless of consequences. Not only would he fulfill his agreement to deliver the bullion safely, but he would carry out if possible his intention to find the men responsible for the previous robberies and murders. "Better take up yore gun, Tug," he invited. "I reckon I can trust you not to shoot me in the back for that reward. Move the team—we might run into that bunch right ahead like we figured."

Again the crack of the whip, the ring of shod hoofs on stone, the crunching pull from hames to whiffletrees. The clang of chains and the grinding of wheels ensued as the two-wagon train moved ahead. Tug Blucher did not take up his rifle, keeping both hands busy with the long jerkline and the blacksnake. The truth was that the freighter still feared the guard who had confessed he was the Thunderbolt—feared him more than the outlaws who had held up previous ore trains.

Again Blucher cried out "Whoa!" and for the first time since reading the poster seized his rifle from under his knee. At this juncture Zack Farrar drew rein suddenly. His carbine leaped up and he fired at an object in front.

A rider had dashed part way across an opening in a cup of the low hills to the left of the mesa. When Zack Farrar's bullet hissed past the fellow's ear he halted with great suddenness.

The guard was motioning to the stranger to come into the arroyo.

Abruptly the rider flung himself from the saddle and started firing, one, two, three. Farrar, seeing that the renegade had taken refuge behind his horse as a screen, jumped at the moment the outlaw started firing and his own six-shooter was rattling. He reached the side of the front ore wagon; there was a moment of intense firing, and the horse of the stranger dropped. A hand went up behind the dying animal. The renegade tossed his gun in an arc overhead, so that it would be seen.

Now he stood up, arms raised high. Again Zack Farrar gestured to the stranger to advance. This time the man obeyed.

He was short and burly, thick-necked, and his skin was deeply pitted with marks of disease.

"Where's yore friends?" demanded the cowboy guard.

"I hain't got no friends."

Zack Farrar slid his carbine into its scabbard and his hand tapped the butt of a six-shooter meaningly. "Talk up, pronto!"

The marred countenance took on a ghastly hue. "I'll tell yuh," he said huskily, "if yuh let me vamoose!"

"Get it off yore chest in a hurry."

"We hain't layin' for the ore train," declared the other. "We're clean over in that draw, travelin' north. If I tell yuh the Gawd's truth, will yuh let me vamoose?"

"Go on with yore alibi," snapped Farrar.

"The gent yo're lookin' for hain't around yere."

"Who is the gent I'm lookin for'?" insisted the buckaroo.

"Tricks Jerome."

The guard's brows knit in a frown. Here was another person on the Soledad trail who was aware of the object that had brought Farrar here.

"Who said I was lookin' for a gent named Tricks Jerome?" he queried carelessly, seeking to draw the stranger out.

"Hell—we all know who yuh are. Yo're the Thunderbolt. Tricks Jerome done for yore pal up in Utah. Now will yuh let me vamoose?"

"Where did you leave Jerome?" snapped the guard, abruptly.

"Honest Injun! I didn't leave him! I hain't even acquainted with that heller! I kin prove us boys hain't with that danged bunch uh train robbers that Tricks is leadin', givin' out he's the Thunderbolt!"

Zack Farrar questioned the renegade further, forcing from him the admission that he was with a different "bunch of punchers" traveling north with a herd of wild horses. The stranger confessed to the name of "Cougar" Jackaree. "If yuh don't believe I'm tellin' yuh the truth yuh kin go up to the next rise an' see me jine the boys with the hosses."

From the fellow's manner as well as his words the guard knew him to be one of a band of thieves. Farrar pocketed Jackaree's six-gun, rode up with him over the arroyo rim and looked down into the draw in the distance.

There ten or eleven men were encamped below, surrounded by half a hundred head of horses.

"Wild horses?" scoffed the jerkline buckaroo. Even at that distance he knew they were not untamed broncos that had been gathered in from the desert, as Jackaree had claimed. "Where'd you steal 'em?"

"We didn't steal 'em," declared Cougar Jackaree, sullenly.

"Now hike. Be damned careful you and yore horse thief friends don't come too close to this arroyo trail. Vamoose!"

Cougar Jackaree started on a run.

The Thunderbolt returned to the ore

train, told Tug Blucher what he had seen and heard. The buckaroo was not looking for horse thieves on this trip. He was aware that Tricks Jerome, desperado from across the walled mountains, was here for bigger game than horses. He knew also that these thieves with Jackaree were too busy looking after their stolen stock to give attention to the freighter train on this particular trip.

"More riders—over thar!" ejaculated Blucher, abruptly. "Might be the colonel is sendin' 'em to look arter the bullion—if that picture o' yourn has been stuck up in Golden!"

CHAPTER V

A Hostile Tenderfoot

THE horsemen, two in number, were too far away to be identified at this distance, but the dust cloud they made on the mesa told that they were traveling in a great hurry. Zack Farrar swung his mount around and stepped him up the arroyo embankment to kill time awaiting their approach. Instead of traveling toward the pair, he moved quickly up the slope overlooking the draw in which the horse thieves had been sighted some moments before.

In a few moments he sat in the saddle at the brow of the hill and looked down into the outlaw camp in the canyon. He counted eleven men and forty-eight horses, pure-bred unsaddled Morgans, in addition to the broncos which the renegades had ridden to this spot. All the men were dismounted now, finishing their noon meal. Cougar Jackaree was hurrying toward them on foot.

Backing away out of sight, the cowboy guard faced again toward the desert side and he now determined that one of the two approaching riders was a woman. Presently he was able to identify one of them as the slim, black-eyed eastern capitalist, Harley P. Day, who had been in Golden for the past month on a deal with the colonel regarding financing the renewed mining operations; the other was George Verdin's daughter, Jessie.

There had been rumors that Day had made offers to buy the colonel's interests outright; also that he had made an offer for the Triple V Ranch, five miles from town. Jessie, whose hobby was her prize herd of Morgan horses, had opposed the sale of the ranch, Farrar had heard in the brief two days he had been around Golden.

Fate had thrown the Utah cowboy into the girl's company one full day at the Triple V, when he had gone there on the tip that Tricks Jerome too intended to find employment there to mask his operations against the colonel's mines. The Thunderbolt had lost his head over the girl as he had never done before over any woman, and he had asked her to be his wife. Her confession that she and the eastern promoter had married had surprised and shocked the cowboy.

As the couple rode up, Zack Farrar saw that both were greatly excited. They had been riding hard; the girl's face was flushed; her companion was white as a sheet of paper, his black eyes roving.

She galloped up in the lead, one hand brushing back her dark hair from her forehead, revealing a pair of anxious, frantic brown eyes.

"Get my horses from those others!" she begged. "Please! They've taken the best of my prize herd!"

"Go back," commanded Farrar, sharply. "You're loco givin' chase to these devils—alone with that tenderfoot husband of yores. Go home!"

"Never!" she declared. "We've got to recover those horses!" She turned to the pale-faced capitalist as he caught up. "Harley, this is Zack Farrar, the cowboy that wanted a job. He's an armed guard now and can help us to recover the horses if he will!"

She dismounted quickly. Harley P. Day followed her example, and Zack Farrar too stepped down from the roan. "Go back, both of you," advised the Thunderbolt, grimly. "I'll do what I can to recover yore horses—later. But this bullion has got to go through safe first—"

Farrar's words were broken off by the sharp, incisive command of the tenderfoot: "Hands up!"

The guard had given no more than a

passing glance toward Harley P. Day. Now when he turned his steel-gray eyes upon the Easterner he saw that the capitalist held a leveled black automatic gun.

"We've got you dead to rights!" snarled Day. "You're an outlaw and murderer—trying to get away with the colonel's gold! I swear I'll have to kill you, Farrar, if you don't raise your hands and surrender! Quick—or by heaven I'll shoot!"

The automatic jutted forward toward the cowboy's eyes.

"No, no! Don't do that, Harley!" exclaimed his companion, stepping in front of him.

The Easterner jumped sideways, away from the screen she had intended placing between the gun and the cowboy. "Put 'em up, or you're a dead man!" he cried out hotly.

CHAPTER VI

Powder-Burned

A DRY laugh escaped the Thunderbolt. He knew well there was greater real peril from a gun in the hands of an excitable tenderfoot than there would have been from a seasoned fighter who realized his advantage fully without losing his head. Yet he could not resist disregarding the command. To be made the victim of a draw in the hands of a man like Harley P. Day was not exactly to the gunfighter's liking.

"Put away that pistol before you hurt yore wife or somebody else with it—maybe yoreself," advised the buckaroo.

"You're a liar! Put up your hands, or I'll—"

"Harley! Don't!" exclaimed his companion, again darting in front of him. Just as quickly the tenderfoot jumped aside. "By heavens, I'll let you have it!" he threatened the Thunderbolt.

"You poor danged fool," said the cowboy, scornfully. "Don't you know I could drill you in spite of that thing if I was in the notion. I'd hate to hurt you, for her sake, but—"

"I swear I'll have to kill you!" The promoter's face was twitching and there was a real threat in his eyes.

The buckaroo watched the weapon in the man's fingers, saw that in his extremely nervous state he was apt to fire any second. Further, the Easterner was beyond all argument.

"Quick! Or I'm killing you!" The muscles of the promoter's hand tensed suddenly.

The guard in that instant knew he must shoot or be shot. Yet he had no intention of killing Day, nor even wounding him, for he knew the man might have been misled into his reckless attempt at capture through the best of motives, mistaking Farrar for a dangerous criminal. But the choice offered the Thunderbolt could not be altered at this juncture. At the very moment Harley P. Day's weapon squeezed more tightly in his hands for the firing, the man from Utah struck.

Again the blur of motion at the Thunderbolt's right side. Again the roar of the Colt.

The leaden slug zoomed far out against the brow of the hill, yet Harley P. Day jumped two feet from the ground, amazement and fright mingling in the excited jet eyes. He jerked his stinging digits downward as though a serpent had sunk fangs into the members. The automatic dropped to the ground like a rod of steel that had suddenly become red hot. Yet no bullet had touched either the man's person or the gun he had held!

The fingers of Day outspread for an instant, then doubled back into the ball of his hand, and he looked down at the seared members in a dumb sort of way, half unbelieving, half ashamed.

He had suffered only a powder-burn, and incredible as the fact must have seemed to him, the chastisement had been deliberately contrived. At the short distance between the hand of the tenderfoot and the Thunderbolt the former had suffered from the discharging powder of the shell while the charge of lead went over his knuckles by the fraction of an inch. It was a feat of speed and marksmanship combined that had rarely if ever been accomplished in the manipulations of a six-shooter. Farrar had taken a long chance on wounding the offender, knowing that at worst he would not have injured him badly.

"I aimed not to cripple him," murmured the freighter guard, soothingly, as he looked into the dazed eyes of the young woman. "Now I reckon you and the lady better be ridin' home. That shot of mine's apt to bring that bunch of horse thieves here pronto."

Sudden reawakened rage flared in the tenderfoot's pale face. "You'll pay for this yet!" he flung out. "You're a fugitive from justice, a wanted man—murderer—and there's a price on your head! Posters are up everywhere, and you won't live twenty-four hours after you ride into any settlement in Arizona!"

The Thunderbolt's eyes contracted swiftly at this bit of information. It was true then, without doubt, that the reward offer was stuck up everywhere, branding him as an escaped man-killer who should be shot on sight.

"I'm obliged to you, anyhow, Mister Day, for yore good intentions to take me a prisoner instead of taking me dead," he said, half sincerely, half ironically. "Miss Jessie—Mrs. Jessie—I reckin yuh better take yore husband home. When I get this shipment to Soledad I'll promise to come back and take the trail for yore horses. I'd try to get 'em now, but you couldn't handle 'em if I did. Adios!"

He turned to his horse, ready to go down the slope toward the waiting ore train. The girl called after him: "Wait, please! I want to talk to you."

The man halted, looked at her keenly. He had been puzzled that she, knowing what the posters contained, should have sought his aid in recovering the horses. A woman should have a more wholesome respect for one branded an escaped murderer than to come to him for help in trouble!

"Harley, excuse us, please." The girl stepped aside, her gloved hand beckoning the cowboy.

The tenderfoot shot her a look. "A secret?" he queried, with half a sneer.

"Yes. About Uncle's business."

The Easterner shrugged, strolled away. This seemed to the cowboy a very unusual proceeding. Jessie Verdin looked up at Farrar with mysterious eyes. "I've made an awful fool of myself with this marriage business," she declared, in a matter-of-fact manner.

The guard was shocked; a harsh, almost ferocious stare was his answer. "You're delayin' this shipment," he said, sourly. "Go and tell yore husband about such personal matters!" He moved toward his horse.

"But there's something you should know," she insisted, keeping pace with him. "Something about this." She produced one of the posters offering the big reward for the Thunderbolt. "I won't detain you long. First, Mr. Day is not my husband—that was a foolish lie I told. It was Harley who first showed me this circular. I thought you were an outlaw—the Thunderbolt. I took that as the easiest way to get rid of you, and when you left me at the corral I saddled up to hurry to town to give the alarm that you were the outlaw."

"Much obliged for that," said the man, stiffly.

"But I know better now! I found it out before I left the ranch to give the news. Will you listen to me courteously or won't you?"

The question brought Zack Farrar to a full realization that he was not even polite, which was partly due to his anxiety to delay the freighter no longer than necessary. "Excuse me," he said, in a changed tone. "I reckon you know other ears than mine heard what you said about you and Day bein' married?"

"No, I didn't know that," she said, a look of dismay in her comely face. She glanced toward the tenderfoot, who stood at a distance nursing his powder-burned hand.

"Well, it don't make any difference—you intended to marry him anyhow, I reckon."

"Perhaps I did," she countered. "But tell me this: Who are you, anyway?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Only this: When I went into the saddle room this morning I overheard talk about you. Two of our new hands were discussing you in the adjoining room of the bunkhouse and I heard them say something about 'framing' you with a fake offer of a reward from the Governor of Utah. They mentioned something about some notices that were to be posted. Does that mean anything?"

"It might mean a lot," he said, meeting her direct gaze. "If those hombres said that, I'd advise yore dad to fire them pronto, because they're members of this outlaw gang. They wouldn't know those things if they were honest hands."

"That's what I thought. But wouldn't it be better to let them stay at the ranch under watch until they betray this notorious Utah Thunderbolt? I heard them say something else—*something about one Farrar.* They said you had come here to 'take' one they called Utah, but they called you 'Thunderbolt' Farrar. Please explain that."

Zack Farrar could have explained it in full, but a certain pride still possessed him and against his better judgment he decided to let the girl remain in the dark on this point. Partly his attitude was due to the feeling that as between a cowboy deputy without means and a wealthy financier Jessie Verdin could but favor the latter, as told by their friendliness—addressing each other by their first names among other things. It was very plain that Harley P. Day had been heaping attentions upon the ranch girl.

"If you didn't figure I was an outlaw when you rode up here fifteen minutes ago with Day, how come you didn't mention that to yore friend?" he wanted to know.

"I did. I even told him my opinion that you were a Utah officer sent here to capture the Thunderbolt, but I know it didn't sound reasonable to him—on account of those notices with your picture and—"

"Well, I'm much obliged to you, ma'am. We'll let things ride a spell and see how they come out." He smiled with a certain desperate hope. "What was that you said about yore uncle?"

"Colonel Eaton? There's something else you should know. Since the town is so desperately in need of supplies, the colonel is sending another train three hours behind yours. Twelve armed men are going with it, determined to bring in supplies. The wagons are going out empty."

Zack Farrar's jaw hardened. This spelled much to him. The colonel lacked faith that the lone guard and Blucher could bring back their wagons loaded with supplies, even if they could get the bullion through.

The suspicion arose also that the mine owner might be sending a bigger shipment of bullion with the heavily guarded train, taking no chances on the pledge of the lone guard to get the gold through. But this was improbable. Farrar had seen the two boxes of bullion packed into the ore of the forward wagon of his own train. The output of the free-milling mines was not great enough to supply two shipments of gold since the last hold-up.

"I'm sorry I can't leave the train to go on the trail of the horse thieves," he told her as he rose to the saddle. "You'll get yore horses back if this band is corralled, and I aim to do my best. You and that Easterner will ride home now, I reckon. I'm waitin' until I see you go."

"Very well," she agreed. With a troubled look she bade Thunderbolt Farrar adios and rejoined Day. The cowboy watched them mount and waited for five minutes until they were well along on the trail toward town.

Tug Blucher grinned as the guard came up. "I was watchin' how ye'd handle that dude upstart," he declared. "He shore had the drap on ye! Ye took him down a peg!" The freighter's manner told that any lingering suspicion he might have had over the reward notice had vanished.

"But I don't like that feller," he went on. "I didn't trust him any from the time I fust set eyes onto him. By Jerry, the way he's tryin' to buy out the colonel and all, it wouldn't surprise me none if he was eggin' these bandits on, figurin' if he could starve out the mines he could shave the price to the figger he wanted to pay!"

Zack Farrar looked at the grizzled driver in mild surprise. An idea very akin to this had suddenly come into his own mind. Up to this meeting with Jessie Verdin he had had no suspicion whatever concerning the promoter. But when the girl had related how her first damaging information about Farrar had come from Day, who had given her the poster, he had been set thinking. Was the Easterner the one who had brought these counterfeit placards here?

If Harley P. Day were using the renegades to serve his own ends it might explain the zeal with which the outlaws had destroyed and burned the supply wagons.

Again the long jerkline guided the leaders up the arroyo trail. The dry wash had deepened, its embankments rising ten to fifteen feet in height. The clouds hung lower, but there seemed no immediate threat of rain.

The wagons passed the spot where the last supply train had been attacked and destroyed. Blackened remnants of two wagons were heaped in a pile, the wood reduced to ashes, the iron braces, wheel tires and rods sticking up from the mass in the center of the arroyo. Battered and fire-eaten canned goods and bottles lay in the ashes. The manner in which the stuff had been heaped together showed the care with which it had been destroyed.

Less than three hundred yards distant were the Pinnacles, two sharp rocks that towered seventy-five to a hundred feet in height from either side of the arroyo trail. Peculiarly, each of them rose from the west side of ravines or cañoncitas that entered the main wide wash. Behind them, in the shelter of the cañoncitas it was possible for men and horses to hide, and from the side of the south Pinnacle, on which was a rock shelf a dozen feet from the floor of the arroyo, robbers had been able to shove forth their guns to cover the trail.

Like the classical Scylla and Charybdis, the Pinnacles must be passed, and there was no telling whether an attack would be made from one or both. Since Tricks Jerome and his men were still at large, it was a fair assumption they would not overlook this latest of the bullion shipments.

In fact, the outlaws were there in waiting. Five men crouched low behind the south Pinnacle, from which they had fired on previous trains.

"That's him on the roan hoss," muttered the leader. "Git him fust—then plug the driver!"

"Yuh mean that ranny is the Thunderbolt?" queried one of the renegades, in awed tones. "He looks 'most like a kid!"

"It's him an' he's a devil," murmured the other. "Yuh cain't be shore he's dead without yuh kin see daylight plumb through him! But it couldn't be nicer. Plug him, boys, the minute he hits the turns!"

Rifles and six-shooters were shoved forward across a ledge of rock awaiting the approach of the wheel-horses at the turn.

But before the turn was reached the Thunderbolt was considering the possibilities of such an ambush.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIGHT AT THE PINNACLES

UP to this point the view of the guard had been unobscured on both sides of the dry wash, the banks of which were under the height of a man in the saddle. Up either slope of the low hills that forked in the arroyo Zack Farrar could see as far as rifle range; therefore he knew no attack would be made until the Pinnacles were reached. The Thunderbolt was not ready to ride into any man's trap; consequently just before the turn was approached, the mounted guard swerved away from the driver suddenly to the right and without giving Blucher notice of his intention, he touched his pony with the spur.

The roan jumped the arroyo embankment like a shot and climbed swiftly toward the ridge of the hill. Seeing the nature of the terrain, the Thunderbolt had guessed that the outlaws were in the cañoncita behind the south rock. From this side of the trail a better getaway would be possible for their horses.

His move had temporarily surprised the outlaws in the small ravine. By turning sharply out of the arroyo he had put himself and horse out of range of those who lay in wait to ambush him.

But the renegades guessed his purpose. In so much dread did they hold the man known as the Thunderbolt that they gave no thought of the team and driver for the moment, but whirled about as one man in their hiding place, their rifles and six-shooters pointed upward toward the ridge behind which they surmised Zack Farrar was traveling.

The Thunderbolt continued to move up the slope, but at a more cautious gait as the ridge was neared. Suddenly he drew rein to a halt, his gray eyes focused upon two tiny black objects just over the edge of the rise.

There was no mistake! The two pointed, flicking objects were the ears of a horse.

Quickly the guard slid his carbine into the saddle scabbard and produced his six-shooter. This promised to be a battle at close range. He touched the rein lightly against the roan's neck and advanced a step. Now he could see the head of the horse in the cañoncita and the ears and foretop of another mount. The bandits had regarded the place where they had left their horses secure from observation, as it would have been from the arroyo trail. Again Zack Farrar advanced slowly.

Abruptly his alert eyes caught the head and shoulders of a man lying prone on the near side of the little ravine, and on the instant two rifle barrels leaped into view. The Thunderbolt's gun blazed twice in rapid succession and on the same instant he slid from the saddle.

He had seen one of the outlwas double up on the ground, his rifle flinging outward from his hand. The result of the second shot he did not know. Quickly Zack Farrar refilled the two empty chambers of his gun and moved upward to the crest of the ridge, on foot, his weapon advanced.

Suddenly gunfire flared from the east side of the pinnacle. Farrar flattened to the ground, shooting once as he did so. He had barely seen his target this time and knew his shot had not gone home. Two men were clinging to the wall of the rock, their faces at the edge. Now they disappeared completely from view.

The cowboy waited, his eyes and forehead alone visible over the rise. One of the men who had been in the floor of the cañoncita had run behind the horses.

The battle had resolved itself into a game of hiding. The Thunderbolt calculated his chances in making an attack against superior numbers to dislodge the renegades. So long as they remained here, secure from his fire, the ore train would be tied up.

He knew Tug Blucher was somewhere near the wagons, armed with his rifle and ready to fight for his life and the train. If the outlaws could be dislodged from the cañoncita and driven into the main arroyo, they would be subjected to two fires. Blucher would attack from below while Farrar charged from above.

There was no way he could communicate this plan to the freighter now, yet he took a chance on Blucher's courage and resourcefulness. Rising, he sped fifty feet to the right, along the ridge of the ravine, preparatory to driving the renegades into the open.

When he looked over the rise at this point he saw the horses moving down deeper into the cañoncita, as though by some premeditated design. He raised his gun and fired at the edge of the rock as part of a man's body was revealed. At that instant a rifle cracked far down in the arroyo, and Farrar knew Blucher was on the job.

Leaping forward, the cowboy poured four shots at the pinnacle's edge, dropped behind a boulder in the cañoncita and reloaded. Though he had not had a fair target, he knew the effect of his firing would force the outlaws farther around the rock into the view of Blucher.

This happened, and he heard the freighter's rifle crack again. Then suddenly the hold-ups executed a plan they must have conceived in advance. Leaving one of their number dead on the slope, the remaining four jumped to the bunched horses.

Farrar was out of sight at the moment of this move, screened by the boulder for a brief period while he was reloading. He heard the clatter of horses' hoofs on the rocky floor of the arroyo. The buckaroo glanced around the boulder in time to see the tail of the last horse whip around the rocky wall of the wash. Hoofs continued to drum up the arroyo. Below him in the cañoncita the Thunderbolt saw the still form of one of the outlaw band; beside it was a rifle. Another Winchester lay four feet away.

Turning hastily, reloading his gun, Zack Farrar ran to his horse, mounted, and spurted down over the slope into the cañoncita and thence into the main wash. He gave pursuit for several hundred yards, far enough to observe the direction taken by the fleeing outlaws, now beyond effective range.

"Good enough," he murmured, grimly, and turned back into the little ravine. He went to the fallen outlaw, saw that he was lifeless with a black hole in his forehead. He looked at the second rifle. There was blood on the stocks. Its owner, wounded in the forearm or hand, had been able to ride away with his confederates.

When the guard rode back to Tug Blucher he found the freighter astride the wheel-horse with rifle in hand. Tug had halted his team, dismounted and calmly taken a position against the arroyo wall, prepared to fight for his life and the bullion. He had been at too great a distance for accurate shooting, but had come near enough to make the renegades uncomfortable. Admiration was in his grizzled countenance for the guard who had routed the hold-ups.

"Now which?" he wanted to know. "They mought come back, which I mean over thar in the Rubies is whar they're headin'. This trail goes through thar and they could lay on their bellies on another big rock an' shoot down on us. Oney reason they didn't use that place afore is because this is farther from whar Sheriff Henry Willot of Weston County lives, I reckon."

The guard was thoughtful. He had never been over the trail before, but he did not doubt that if such a favorable spot for an ambuscade existed farther on, the hold-ups would again be heard from. They would crave revenge for the slaying of one of their number and they had a very special reason for wanting to bag the Thunderbolt. Further, they would be unwilling to forget the big shipment of bullion—twenty thousand dollars in gold. From what Colonel Eaton had said, some "inside" informant had been communicating with the outlaws whenever bullion was to be freighted out of the isolated hill town of Golden.

"If you go back out of the arroyo, can you make it through to Soledad on the desert and miss this other trap?" he questioned.

"Be plumb hard on the team, sand an' all," averred the freighter. "But I'd ruther tackle it than risk them Ruby Hills."

Zack Farrar was thinking of his pledge to Colonel Eaton to see the gold through safely. He inquired about the nature of the country to the south.

"Bad goin' and long around, but we kin make it o' course. No trail to speak about, jest sand an' scrub. Night'll be dark—we mought not ketch our bearin's well. Be all right if we don't git lost over thar in the Corkscrew."

"Corkscrew?"

"Wust hole on the desert—plumb a bad 'un. Devil's Corkscrew has tuk the lives of most that's got theirselves into its tangle. Twistin', turnin' high banks in a deep basin that's a holy terror an' hotter'n the hinges, daytime. Reckon we could miss it, though."

"How far's the nearest ranch outfit? I'd like to get a pack horse."

"Pack hoss?" Blucher was puzzled. "There ain't no ranch less'n twenty mile. But back away, over thar towards the Rubies, is Red Rock tradin' post. If ye need an extry hoss—but why do ye want sech an anemile?"

CHAPTER VIII

FARRAR QUITS THE WAGONS

FARRAR was thoughtful a moment. "Reckon my own horse will carry double," he mused. "I might be able to pack those two boxes." He reached a decision. "I'll do it, usin' a couple of those gunnysacks to ease the weight of the bullion." He dismounted, while the freighter stared at him.

"Ye goin' to pack the bullion? Where?" queried the bewildered driver.

"I'll explain in a minute." Stepping up over the hub of a front wheel, the buckaroo climbed into the forward ore wagon. Pulling on his leather gloves, he began to pile up the big hard chunks of auriferous rock, burrowing into the center of the load.

While Tug Blucher continued to gaze in silence, the guard laid the ore pieces forward and behind, piling them higher and higher on the wagon. This opened up the center of the load. Now he lifted out one of the strongboxes. The "heft" of it told him it was in the neighborhood of fifty pounds, probably a little above that figure. Sliding it to the edge of the wagon, he stepped down and eased it gently to the ground.

He returned to the ore pile and took out the second, repeating the operation. It was of like weight. About ninety pounds of gold bars were credited to the shipment, the ironbanded boxes adding another twenty pounds. Figured at eighteen dollars an ounce Troy weight, the bullion would total the twenty thousand.

Piling back the ore hurriedly, he took two gunnysacks from the trailer wagon, jacketed a box in each, then with a piece of wire bound the sacks together at their tops, making a crude pair of saddle bags. Doubling the containers in the middle, he heaved them up over the horn in such fashion that the sharp, weighty corners of the sacked boxes rested on the saddle skirt and front jockey, the heavy leather protecting the roan from possible galling. The Thunderbolt mounted behind the load.

He explained the object of all these moves briefly: "I aim to take no chances with this bullion. I'm totin' it into Soledad alone, by a roundabout way. I'll make better time than you, so when you get there, the stuff will be waitin' for you at the sheriff's office. I won't be there—my agreement with the company was to go only to Soledad, there bein' no danger beyond that point. Then I'm comin' back here to look up this gang—to-night. By goin' the sand trail, you'll avoid the Ruby trap and I reckon that bunch will be fooled a-plenty. But as I said, I'm takin' no chances with the bullion."

Tug Blucher frowned and there was a renewed suspicion in his sharp eyes. "Why couldn't ye risk fightin' it out with me an' the team?" he wanted to know. "It'll look plumb pecoolier to the colonel — ye cartin' off the gold over thar on hossback alone!"

"I'll tell you," said the guard, ignoring the implication that Farrar after all might be guilty of robbery in this manner. "After that poster was put up sayin' I'm a wanted man with a price on my head I cain't afford to lose this gold under any consideration. If that happened, the colonel would shore think me guilty of the whole charge—couldn't blame him, either. So I'm determined to get this bullion into Soledad no matter what happens."

"And leave me an' the team—?"

"No." Farrar caught his meaning. "I'll keep you in sight. You'll be travelin' away from where this bunch is hidin', anyway. But if they go for you, I'll drop the bullion into the mesquite and beat them across to you, where we'll fight it out together. Then they won't get the gold no matter what happens."

The freighter was not altogether satisfied, but he gave sullen assent.

"When you get into Soledad and find the bullion in the sheriff's hands, I reckon you'll trust me complete," said the Thunderbolt. He turned his heavily laden roan out of the arroyo and struck over the trackless waste of desert to the east.

Though the country was new to him, there was no mistaking the conspicuous landmark ahead, the purple spires of the Juniper Mountains, which in spite of the cloudy afternoon shone clear in the rare Arizona air. Soledad lay at the foot of the Junipers, on the west.

For a time the man from Utah kept a sharp lookout for the band who had attempted to rob the freighter. He traveled away from the direction they had taken, however, and likewise away from the Ruby Hills where they probably had gone in a roundabout way. Tug Blucher's team too was making distance from the Rubies.

The Thunderbolt for a very particular reason was obsessed with the necessity of delivering the gold into safe hands without fail. Since he had been falsely branded as a fugitive with a price upon his head, he realized his mission in Arizona would fail unless he corrected the false impression given in the poster. Everything depended upon doing this. And since he expected to return to Golden to continue his hunt for the notorious Utah outlaw he must retain the confidence of Colonel Eaton, most influential personality of the entire district. He must explain to the colonel the reason for the reward offer. He would never be believed if by any chance this gold shipment did not go through.

He had no intention of sacrificing Tug Blucher to the renegades. He was riding in a manner that would keep the freighter train under his eye until the wagons had passed the danger point. By riding far to the right he could see the train even when he kept out of sight in the draws and arroyos that offered a screen. Since the country was open for many miles he knew he could reach Blucher as quickly as the outlaws if the latter should set out to intercept the freighter.

Soledad, he estimated, was twenty-five miles from the point where the attempted hold-up had occurred, if a direct line were taken, but it was at least five miles farther in the roundabout course now followed by the wagons, and several miles still farther on the route taken by Farrar.

The afternoon advanced, the rider traveling at a snail's pace, not above four miles an hour, in order to keep the freighter in sight.

Both the guard and the wagons continued to widen the distance from the Rubies, where, Farrar believed, the outlaws were awaiting the train.

The day drew to a close in a gloomy setting of darkening clouds, with faint flashes of sheet lightning far across the mountains of Utah. A smudge of scattering buildings in the distance told that Soledad was near at hand, snug against the foot of the Junipers. The white dust cloud churned up by the ore train was still faintly discernible behind.

Tug Blucher's detour, Farrar was satisfied, had given the renegades the slip. By now he surmised they would be traveling back in the arroyo to learn why he was so long in coming. The last place they would look for the ore train would be this far south on the desert, crossing the waterless Rabbit "river."

The Thunderbolt pressed his roan into a lope, for he deemed the freighter safe.

Just before darkness hid all from view he halted suddenly, startled at making out the vague forms of riders in the distance, traveling toward the village. Who these horsemen were he could not guess unless they were the outlaws. It was barely possible that a posse had been working out from Soledad, though this was unlikely since that town had not been molested by the raiders.

Lights glowed dully in the hamlet of Soledad. It was near nine o'clock in the evening when the Thunderbolt rode into the tranquil village, his eyes alert for the presence of hostile members of Jerome's outlaw band while he sought the office of the sheriff to make delivery of the gold there.

CHAPTER IX

The Sheriff Is Careful

IN spite of the lateness of the hour, it was never past office time with Sheriff Henry Willot until he had gone to bed. His newly-plastered adobe quarters in front of the jail were a favorite loafing place in the warm summer evenings. Tonight it was not exactly a rendezvous, due in part to the rumble of distant thunder and occasional flashes of lightning, but three men sat on the long wooden bench in front of the building.

Zack Farrar had expected he might have to look up the sheriff at his home; he was pleased, therefore, when even at a hundred yards distance he saw the glint of nickeled metal on the chest of one of the three men sitting under the light of the oil lamp. He was surprised at the absence of anyone in the street otherwise, for though the general store and like trading places were closed, lights glowed garishly at three saloons and in front of the pool hall. Farrar noticed particularly the absence of horses at the hitch-racks, in spite of the fact that half a dozen riders had recently entered town.

A moment later his alert eyes detected a number of mounts in the darkened enclosure of the town corral back of the street. The gloom made them vague of outline, but they looked suspiciously as though they were saddled. This discovery served to put the Thunderbolt on his guard.

He rode directly toward the three men on the bench. His heavy gunnysack cargo was still in place, though there was nothing to indicate that the saddle pack contained twenty thousand dollars in gold bullion.

As he neared, his glance jumped from the trio on the bench to a poster on the wall of the sheriff's office, revealed dimly by the light of the oil lamp over the door. The printed words were not readable at that distance nor were the features in the picture discernible, but the general aspect of the placard told that it was the notice concerning the Thunderbolt.

Harley P. Day had warned of this! Yet Farrar had clung to the hope that Soledad had not been placarded. Since the reward offer was a fake he had thought the sheriff of this neighboring county might not accept it as bona fide. But Tricks Jerome had made his plans well. This would mean difficulty even in delivering the bullion. The sheriff would recognize him from the picture and he would have to do some tall explaining. If the riders who had entered town were hostile — which was certain even if they were possemen—it would complicate matters further.

Henry Willot, he had learned in Golden, was an honest official, unlike Sheriff Bill Bishop of Oro County. Even Colonel Eaton was aware that Bishop was untrustworthy, one suspected as a tool of the outlaw element that preyed on ranchmen and mining companies alike. It was Farrar's knowledge of Sheriff Willot's square-dealing reputation that had made him decide to leave the shipment in the sheriff's care overnight, knowing the express office would be closed.

The cowboy guard glanced up the street, toward the lights of the saloons and the pool hall. Not a soul had moved in or out of these places since he had entered the street. In one of the four establishments he was satisfied the recently discovered riders had taken refuge. That they were remaining out of sight and that no one except the trio on the bench was abroad seemed significant. But for the lights, even the places up the street appeared deserted.

Farrar did not show his suspicions in any manner as he drew up his mount at the sheriff's hitch-rack, removed his boots from the stirrups and stepped down in the faint glow of the oil lamp. Tying his pony, he gave attention to his cargo.

Up to this time the three men sat in lounging attitude upon the bench, their drawling voices alone breaking the stillness except for the intermittent rumble of the distant storm clouds. Sheriff Henry Willot had seen the rider approaching, as had Jimmy Orr, his deputy, and Ty Graham, proprietor of the assay office.

Through long years of habit the sheriff had scrutinized the newcomer from the time the rider's general aspect was discernible in the darkened street. Now, when the light revealed Farrar's features he exchanged glances with his deputy and rose slowly from the bench. Assayer Graham jumped up in haste and emitted a low exclamation.

"Holy cats, Sheriff, I believe it's him!" he whispered.

The officer strolled carelessly toward the upper end of the adobe, plunged in thought. Jimmy Orr continued to sit unmoving on the bench, observing the newcomer's every move as he unpacked the wired burlaps containing the boxes.

Ty Graham was very much excited, more so than the sheriff, whom he trailed toward the end of the building. He had been dumbfounded at his discovery that the horseman was the man whose face was pictured on the poster; he was even more astonished at the sheriff's apparent lack of interest in Farrar.

"That hombre that just rode in is the Thunderbolt, Sheriff!" he said now, thickly. "See, he's riding a roan pony, too. Don't you want him?"

Henry Willot's bronzed countenance was sober and unperturbed. "I want to be sure," he said, easily. "Be careful you don't lose your head."

Ty Graham flushed, revealing a sense of guilt over his own lack of nerve in the face of the Thunderbolt, reputed man-killer and escape artist who always slew his captors. After all, it was not his job to make a prisoner of Farrar; he had merely been an idler on the bench when the Thunderbolt had appeared. "Look at his face now while he's unpacking those gunnysacks, Sheriff," he went on huskily. "He's wearing a six-shooter and has a rifle on his saddle. Don't you want him?" he asked, in a voice that was noticeably unsteady.

"We don't want him—yet," replied the sheriff, grimly.

Ty Graham was nonplussed. Cowardice might have explained this remark but for the fact that Henry Willot was not a coward. He had shown the utmost courage and disregard for his own life on more than one occasion since he had become a peace officer years before. Dangerous as the Thunderbolt might be, it was not like Sheriff Willot to "lay down."

Jimmy Orr, the deputy, a youth of considerable experience and good judgment, was likewise making no move to cover Farrar, which Graham found difficult to understand. The sheriff had turned about, brows still wrinkled in thought, and moved toward the hitch-rack where the Thunderbolt was easing the cinches of the roan. The two gunnysacks, with wire detached, rested on the edge of the board sidewalk.

Ty Graham, at the sheriff's elbow, murmured something about "the posse" in the saloon. "Funny none of 'em have come out. They might lend a hand. Want me to go over and give the news?"

"No!" said the sheriff, gruffly.

"But—"

"Listen, Ty. They know that hombre is here—knew he was coming. So did I! There's going to be gunplay a-plenty in this town pronto, I reckon. If you want to help, stay here on the sidewalk while Jimmy and I talk to this Farrar, and if those possemen come out, keep 'em away from my office till I get through with this fellow." The sheriff motioned the assayer back in the shadows and advanced boldly toward the jerking buckaroo.

"Evening," he drawled. "If you're Zack Farrar, come into my office—I want to talk to you. Reckon you know I'm the sheriff."

The Thunderbolt nodded, extended his hand in greeting. Henry Willot gazed at him steadily without making a move. For a tense moment the eyes of the two men remained fixedly upon one another. It was a new experience to Farrar to have another refuse his hand.

"Come inside," said the sheriff, slowly, "and I'll state why I'm not appearing friendly to a wanted man in public. Jimmy, come along with us."

The officer turned to the door of the office, motioning toward Farrar.

"Good enough," said the cowboy. "But we'd better carry in those sacks. There's twenty thousand dollars in gold in 'em. I'm askin' you to lock up the bullion in yore office for the night, for Colonel Eaton."

"Those sacks are safe where they are, Farrar. Come in."

"You plumb sure, Sheriff, who those gents are who rode in here about dark—that you can trust them?"

Henry Willot frowned. "The gold is safe enough. I'll tell you why in a minute." He led the way into the office, and his first act inside the door was to offer his hand. "I didn't want Ty Graham to think I was fraternizing with you — just yet—for fear he might mention it to those fellows in the Broken Bow Saloon. He thinks they are possemen. They are outlaws, and one of them claims to be the

Thunderbolt. I was in doubt myself about the true state of affairs until you unloaded that twenty thousand, and thereby hangs a tale. Meanwhile, I'm glad to know the real Utah Thunderbolt. There's going to be a scrap here pronto. Sit down."

CHAPTER X

A Reception Committee

THE surprising words of the sheriff, seemingly contradictory on certain points, caused Zack Farrar to marvel. The two men now sat across the table facing each other, while Deputy Jimmy Orr occupied a seat against the wall, a silent spectator.

To the cowboy it was not understandable that the sheriff should refer to him as the real Thunderbolt as against the claim of Jerome, nor could he conceive why Jerome should admit that he was the Thunderbolt. If Willot knew Farrar's true identity, then why the placard on the office door? Further, if the sheriff knew the men in the saloon were outlaws, why was he insistent on leaving the gold exposed on the sidewalk instead of bringing it into the office?

This latter point the sheriff cleared up in a startling manner: "Those boxes in the gunnysacks don't contain gold, Farrar. You might as well know it now. They're filled with lead. That was merely Colonel Eaton's way of testing you!"

"Filled with lead?" The buckaroo's surprise was mingled with resentment. The colonel had not trusted him, after all! The real shipment of bullion was coming over the trail later that night, with the big band of armed guards.

"No harm done," went on Henry Willot, reading something of the cowboy's feelings. "In fact, it has served a good purpose, proving your honesty and at the same time exposing this fake posse."

This put a more cheerful aspect on things. After all, the colonel could not be blamed for not risking such a shipment to one lone guard, a stranger in the country who had not even shown his credentials as an officer. Further, the colonel was giving the cowboy a chance to prove himself trustworthy, perhaps having in mind some important mission later on. Otherwise Eaton would not have interested himself one way or another. Certainly the mine owner had had no suspicion that Farrar was the Thunderbolt, either the outlaw of that assumed name or the Utah deputy.

"Yes, the colonel sent word what he was doing," went on the sheriff. "So you can see that it doesn't matter much whether that gang in the Broken Bow grabs the 'bullion' or not!"

"That part's plain enough now," admitted Farrar. "But if you knew about this gang—"

"I didn't—until you rode up here with the shipment and announced you wanted it left in my care. I knew then you could not be the robber; you'd have grabbed the boxes before you got to Soledad, because that's where this gang has been operating."

The sheriff produced a letter, handed it over. Farrar read as follows:

> Dear Sheriff: One of my men will probably call on you within the next ten days on a very important case the nature of which I will leave him explain to avoid a possible leak by letter. He may take a name other than his own, but you may verify that he is from my office if he admits to the name of the Thunderbolt.
>
> D. M. Olmstead,
> U. S. Marshal.

Farrar was vastly interested in this. But some things were still not clear. "Seeing you got that letter, Sheriff, why'd you post that fake notice about me being wanted by the Governor of Utah?"

"Well, in the first place I wasn't sure it was a fake. A fellow name of Day—pale, slim hombre—brought it in yesterday saying Sheriff Bishop of Golden had got a supply of the notices—"

"Harley P. Day brought it over, did he?" queried the cowboy, very much interested in this revelation.

"That was the name he gave. Well, I didn't know whether somebody was masquerading in the rôle of the officer whom the marshal had written about, or whether the real Thunderbolt might have inspired those notices for the purpose of smoking out a road agent who had taken his name. I was inclined to the latter theory. If so, I figured the real Thunderbolt would describe in that notice the true appearance of the criminal. This evening when that so-called posse arrived, I was still up in the air."

Henry Willot glanced out of the window toward the glaring lights up the street. He saw that Jimmy Orr was keeping the Broken Bow under close watch, and resumed:

"I was pretty much tangled up, and neither Jimmy here nor I could figure it. We knew, of course, that the road agents were active between here and Golden, but we didn't know the head of the gang had taken the name of the Thunderbolt — at least not until this bunch arrived a short while ago."

Willot's bronzed countenance held a frown. "When they rode in, I played sucker. But I'm getting ahead of my story. About noon to-day a messenger came over from the colonel to tell me he was sending over a guard of your description with this shipment of lead supposed to be gold. He asked me to report if you actually arrived here with the two boxes intact.

"When I got that message I checked the description with the reward notice and figured you were sure the bandit and would never arrive here with the boxes. I couldn't understand why the colonel would send you, in view of those notices being spread around, unless for some strange reason the colonel hadn't seen them."

"Those notices weren't posted in Golden up to this morning," informed Farrar. "I reckon that bunch had a reason for holdin' them to a certain time. They must have had 'em printed a week ago, soon as Tricks Jerome found out I was comin' here to get him."

The sheriff grunted in disgust. "Where I played sucker was this: To-night—when that bunch rode in, they claimed to be a posse sent over by Sheriff Bishop. I took 'em for genuine, and when their leader stated he had come here a few days ago from Utah to run down the killer, giving your description, I figured for sure he was the deputy marshal Thunderbolt. I pulled out this letter and showed it to him. Right off, then, he claims he is the Utah Thunderbolt—the officer."

"What's he look like, Sheriff?"

"About forty, little fellow, quick and wiry, sandy hair, got a hawk's eye and a hawk's nose, ears stick out and his head sets low on his shoulders like he has no neck."

"Tricks Jerome. Sheriff, if he's up there now I aim to go and get him."

"Better not be in a hurry. He's got a good-sized reception committee to greet you."

CHAPTER XI

Tricks Plays His Hand

"I AIM to help you," went on the sheriff. The lamp on the table revealed his determined features. "There'll be three of us. Jimmy, get your horse and ride up to the end of the street. Wait there about five minutes, until you see the light in the office go out. That's to be your cue that we're starting from this end. You take the back door of the Broken Bow and Farrar and I will go in the front. We'll corral most of that bunch in a hurry."

The Thunderbolt had some misgivings about this program, recalling Tricks Jerome's threat to shoot any man who aided the Utah deputy in the man-hunt. But he could not protest at the sheriff's determination to do his duty. The chances of a successful round-up of the outlaws would be greatly increased, of course, with three men on their trail instead of one.

Jimmy Orr rose and went to the door. He disappeared into the night, going to the corral to saddle a mount.

Farrar was dubious about the leisurely manner of the sheriff in preparing for this showdown with the outlaws, fearing they might leave the saloon at any moment. Willot explained why there was no hurry. "They're waiting in there until they hear from me. I was supposed to arrest you when you came in. Then they, pretending to be the posse, were to come and get you and take you back to Golden. I reckon you know what would happen to you if I delivered you over to them, a prisoner."

Farrar grinned.

Suddenly wagons rumbled in the street, with the click of hoofs and the rattle of chains.

"It's Tug Blucher with the ore train," said Farrar. He was relieved that the freighter had arrived safely. A flash of lightning showed the driver and the team drawing up to the sheriff's office. The arrival of the freighter gave the cowboy deputy an idea.

"It's mighty important to get supplies into Golden, since these renegades have been destroyin' the shipments the last few weeks," he said. "Is there somebody in town here who could take that ore train through to Smeltersville?"

"Sure, the Soledad Transport could handle it—that direction. Company refuses to do any hauling to Golden, though, on account of these raids."

"That's what I thought. You reckon Blucher could hire a fresh team to start back to Golden to-night—if I'd put up the company's check with the store as security?" He drew out the colonel's check for one thousand dollars, made out to the Soledad Mercantile Company for provisions. "The store could load in five hundred dollar's worth and guarantee the other five hundred in case the team was run off."

"That ought to be easy—if we corral that bunch and remove the danger of a hold-up," grinned the sheriff.

At this juncture Tug Blucher appeared at the door. His grizzled countenance held a smile as he looked at the jerkline buckaroo. "I see ye brung the bullion through," he commented. "Wal, I'm ready to hit the hay till marnin'!"

Zack Farrar nodded, for there was no reason to tell Blucher of the nature of the "bullion" at this time.

"There's a bunch of road agents under Tricks Jerome in this town, Tug," said the guard. "There's goin' to be a scrap muy pronto. If some of 'em get away, they might still hold up the provisions in daylight. Would you be willing to start back to-night with them?"

The freighter forgot all about being tired, seeing the need for his services might be very great indeed. He assented readily, Farrar gave him the check to be paid to the store, and the sheriff scribbled a note to the merchant asking him as a special favor to open up to-night long enough to load the wagon.

"I'm rarin' to go, wal enough," declared the freighter, puffing his pipe, "but why all this hullabaloo if ye figger to take the gang to jail?"

Farrar called attention to the band of horse thieves of which Cougar Jackaree was one. "Chances are they're part of Jerome's crowd. You figured they go only as far as Red Rock trading post, Tug, and I have a notion they'll be back along this trail to raise Cain with the supply wagons even if we corral the bunch here in town now."

Tug Blucher saw the point. Some time had been taken in arranging these matters, but if the sheriff was right in saying Jerome was waiting for word that the Thunderbolt had been captured, the delay would not be costly. Meanwhile Jimmy Orr had returned with his mount and was waiting the sheriff's word before starting up the street. Now he rode away at a slow jog.

"They won't be suspicious of Jimmy, if they notice him riding past, like they would be if it was me," said Willot. "Now, the way I figure to work it is this: Soon as Jimmy gets all set, you and I will sally out. We'll march up to the Broken Bow, and it will look like I had you in custody, ready to deliver you over to them —the so-called posse. Before they can say Jack Robinson, we'll have 'em covered, with Jimmy taking care of the rear."

The plan was well conceived, though it savored somewhat of a ruse in which the renegades would not have a fair chance to fight. In dealing with men who would do murder if they had the opportunity, this was not only justifiable, but plain common sense.

Tug Blucher had gone off to arrange for the new outfit to carry the supplies meanwhile driving the ore train into the town corral, where the tired team would be looked after until morning. Farrar would communicate with the Soledad Transport later about taking the ore through to Smeltersville.

Sheriff Willot rose. "You've got your horse already saddled. Stay here a minute until I get mine — in case there's a chase. Soon as I come up to the door you can blow out the lamp, which will be what Jimmy is waiting for—"

The words died in his throat, to the accompaniment of gunfire and shattering glass. A heavy report had come to the ears of Farrar from the street, and he knew a shot had been fired through the window. As he leaped up, his Colt jumping to his hand, the sheriff sank to the floor.

The Thunderbolt sprang for the door. But as he seized it, he found it unyielding, and there was a scraping sound as though some heavy object had been placed against it. At that instant the remaining glass in the window pane crashed loudly, and a gun was hurled into the room, falling upon the floor.

Zack Farrar did not lose his presence of mind. He snatched up the lamp, extinguished the light. In another moment his gun was at the window, searching foes without. But the opening, though the glass was broken out, was barred, and the sturdy rods of iron prevented him from placing his head far enough out to get a view outside except directly in front. At that juncture a howl went up from near the door.

"The Thunderbolt's killed the sheriff! Give the alarm, somebody—quick! He's ketched — trapped in the office!" With that someone fired three rapid shots, to summon the town.

The speaker was Tricks Jerome.

In a trice the whole situation dawned upon the buckaroo. The Utah killer had slipped away from the Broken Bow, perhaps becoming suspicious over the long conference being held by the sheriff and the cowboy deputy. He probably was not alone. Jerome had skulked about the office, his object being to slay the Thunderbolt and the sheriff—the latter because he feared now that Henry Willot was aware of the cowboy's real identity.

That Zack Farrar had not fallen in the assassination was due to the fact that, by force of habit, he had placed himself out of gun range of the window. There was but one light pane in the office, that facing the street on the south side of the door. When Farrar had come into the office he had taken his place facing the door, close enough to the wall to be out of view from the window. This he had done not only because his training had taught him not to expose himself when among enemies, but because he knew there was a big price on his head and not only Tricks Jerome's band but others might attempt to take him dead and win the ten thousand dollar bounty.

The Thunderbolt was beside the fallen sheriff, his head on the officer's chest. The heart of the courageous Willot had ceased to beat, and though the darkness did not reveal the whereabouts of the bullet hole, the moistened spot on the sheriff's shirt told he had been shot close to the heart if not through it.

Fury blazed in the brain of the jerk-line guard as he rose to his feet quickly and glided again to the window. Through the hole that had been made by the bullet and the gun that had followed it, the street was visible as far as the first of the saloons. Figures of hurrying men were outlined by the glare of lights. Hoarse mutterings of others near the office door came to the cowboy's ears. In vain the guard tried to put these within view. Failing, he reached his six-shooter out through the bars, turned the weapon sharply to the left and emptied it, weaving it as he did so.

"Cripes!" He heard the yell of Jerome and the rush of booted feet around the edge of the building. Bounding to the door again, the Thunderbolt strained his utmost to force it out and open. But whatever had been propped against it was firmly anchored.

He reloaded his six-shooter and began a quick search for the weapon that had been hurled into the room. The act of the renegades in tossing in the gun had mystified him for a moment, but he suspected they had done so in order to incriminate him. Now when his fingers found the weapon and ran down across the front of the cylinder chambers he found one of the shells had been fired. This was the murder gun and it was a .38. He knew now for certain why the gun had been tossed into the room; the mate of the balls that had not been discharged would be found in the body of the sheriff.

This had been a typical trick of Tricks', to prepare for possible emergencies; yet the howls that were now arising in the street told that the outlaw did not intend to wait for the formality of a trial by jury. Among those racing down the wide thoroughfare were doubtless the bulk of the killer's band. Townsmen were joining them at every yard and Farrar heard the high-pitched shout of Jerome beyond the door:

"He's trapped, boys! Right in the office, where he jest murdered yore sheriff! Who's got a rope an' we'll string that heller up in a hurry!"

There was a roar from the gathering mob, then the killer's voice rang out once more:

"All members uh the posse from Golden will keep the buildin' covered, fore an' aft. Who's the man will volunteer to go in an' drag him out?"

There was a blinding flash of lightning and a clap of ear-splitting thunder. Almost at the same instant sheets of rain swept down in fury, driven by the gale against the little office and through the broken window. Zack Farrar saw that in the surging crowd that was being reinforced with each passing second it would be impossible to single out the road agents from the deceived citizens of Soledad. He took the one chance that offered a faint hope of getting out of the trap, and started through the door that separated the office from the jail.

The likelihood of an open door at the rear of the corridor was slim indeed. He was now in the jail. Abruptly he halted, turned back into the office, thinking to get the sheriff's keys for use in opening the rear door. He looked through the slain officer's pockets in vain, searched quickly in the darkness through the sheriff's desk, without success.

He was forced to risk getting out without a key.

CHAPTER XII

A Shootin' Volunteer

SOLEDAD'S little four-cell jail was without a single prisoner. No light burned in the narrow corridor, nor did Zack Farrar wish for one. He groped his way along the passage, hands running along the grating of the cells. Once when lightning flashed through the skylight overhead he glimpsed the rear door for which he was traveling. There was little hope that the barrier would yield without a key, and it was doubtless strongly built. Yet the cowboy based his hope of escape upon it.

It was true that he was far from "taken" even though a prisoner in the jail. An armed prisoner has things not exactly his own way, but he can make trouble. The Thunderbolt was armed. Farrar smiled grimly now as he recalled Tricks Jerome's request for a "volunteer" to go into the office to get him.

It was significant that the killer had not offered to perform this duty himself. Nor had he ordered any of his men to do it. The outlaw's escape had dictated this line of conduct. He knew well enough that the Thunderbolt was a bona fide officer of Utah, not only a deputy sheriff but a deputy United States marshal. As such, Zack Farrar would not shoot down a citizen of Soledad who might enter the jail to subdue him. On the other hand, Jerome or his men—at least such of those whom the officer might know—would run into a heap of trouble in trying to put the cuffs on Farrar.

Of course, the chief of the road agents intended to make a speedy job of things and engineer a lynching. Farrar would have no opportunity to tell his story. If necessary, Jerome would shoot him down without waiting for the rope, rather than have the Thunderbolt reveal the truth to the mob.

The crowd now about the jail could be called by no other name than a mob, the cowboy deputy knew. As he reached the back door and found it secured by a big padlock he heard footsteps outside, in the mud. The building was completely surrounded. Sounds of voices drifted in through the night, above the swish of the rain and the whistle of the gale. It would take more than a storm to drive these determined men from the office and jail tonight.

Menacing as they were to him now, Farrar had no quarrel with the citizens of Soledad. These believed their fellow townsman and law-defender had been cruelly shot to death by the notorious outlaw branded as the Thunderbolt. They had read the placard on the sheriff's office. They would be athirst for the blood of the "bandit" who had slain Willot, as they believed.

Again Zack Farrar traveled to the front, ears and eyes straining for any sound or shred of light that might betray the presence of someone in the room he had recently left. Had he found anyone here his problem would have been a hard one, for fear that a citizen or several had volunteered to pull Jerome's chestnuts from the fire.

But a flare of lightning from the broken window revealed that the office was still unoccupied. Someone was talking outside. Farrar recognized the voice of Bert DeWees, the crook-nosed renegade whose thumb he had shot off earlier that day.

"That son-of-a-sidewinder intended to grab the gold between here an' Smeltersville," DeWees was arguing. "He brung it here for a blind, knowin' us possemen was close on his trail. The son-of-a-Gila monster! He shot down one of our boys by the Pinnacles—killed pore Jeff Herriman dead! Shootin' down possemen thataway! He's shore a dangerous snake-in-the-grass if they ever was one—"

"Dangerous hell," grunted Tricks Jerome. "He's yalla as a Navajo squash, when yuh git him up agin a even draw! Who'll volunteer to go an' drag'm out?"

There was a long and meaningful silence.

"Why don't you go?" asked somebody in the crowd.

"Who? Me? Hell, I'd go in there so quick yore head would spin off if it wasn't that hombre knows who I am!"

"It's dark in there—he couldn't see who it was," suggested another.

"Like heck he wouldn't know it was me! That hombre's got his ear glued to the door this minute, likely, listenin' to every danged word we say!"

The Thunderbolt smiled grimly. Tricks was doing his best to inveigle a townsman to go in for the prisoner, knowing the officer would not use his gun on such a person.

"Bert, I tell yuh what yuh do," said Jerome, suddenly. "Load up them boxes uh bullion an' take 'em back to Colonel Eaton—over to Golden. This hombre's got a big gang uh men somewheres an' they might high-tail it into town any minute. Case they do, this gold wouldn't be safe a second. Git goin' pronto, Bert. Take two uh the boys with yuh, case yuh run into this Thunderbolt's gang!"

"That's a hell of a good idee!" declared DeWees with alacrity, and from the sounds without he was getting busy in a hurry with the fake shipment of bullion. Zack Farrar almost laughed. DeWees would be a surprised renegade when he opened the boxes and found what they contained. That the crook-nosed outlaw would not delay long in getting away with the heavy cargo was certain, and Farrar knew well enough that he would try to double-cross his superior in appropriating the shipment for himself. DeWees had proposed some such betrayal of Jerome that very morning.

That Tricks was unwilling to leave Soledad himself without seeing Farrar put out of the way was evident. Anxious as he might have been to keep an eye on his followers who took charge of the "gold," he was still more anxious to put an end to the Thunderbolt.

But the road agent chief was trying to speed things up. "Ain't any hombre in this town got guts to go in there an' take that hombre that killed yore sheriff?" he taunted.

Out of the stillness that ensued came a voice that caused the Thunderbolt to stiffen. "I reckon I'm man enough to go in there and get him," said the speaker. Farrar recognized the voice of Deputy Sheriff Jimmy Orr.

His first impression was that the deputy, roused by the belief that the cowboy had actually slain his superior officer, was willing to risk his life in taking Farrar a prisoner. A certain sullen grimness was in his tone that gave this impression. Jimmy Orr, though he had ridden up the street a short time before, on an expedition to take Jerome's gang prisoners in the Broken Bow, was some distance away when the shot had been fired that ended the sheriff's life. So cunningly had Jerome staged the assassination that even the deputy might believe Farrar had done the killing, in which case he would conclude that the jerkline buckaroo after all was the outlaw.

But the cowboy reflected that the deputy had been present during the entire interview between the Thunderbolt and the sheriff; he had heard every word, though he had not uttered a syllable himself. He surely must know that Henry Willot had made no mistake in trusting Farrar; he must know about the letter from the United States Marshal of Utah.

"Have you boys got the rope?" came the voice of Jimmy Orr again.

There were mutterings of assent.

Now the deputy called out in loud tones, addressing the prisoner in the office: "Are you comin' peaceable, Farrar, or are yuh goin' to swap lead when I come in to get yuh?"

The cowboy's mind worked swiftly. Had Deputy Orr intended to come in and get him and turn him over to a mob, he never would have spoken of a rope, in tones loud enough for the intended victim to hear. Further, there was no reason for this question about resistance that Farrar could see, unless it was to invite an answer that would keep others out while Orr entered alone.

"I'm sure goin' to hand you smoke a-plenty, hombre," returned the jerkline guard, in tones meant as a threat to the crowd to stand their distance.

"That suits yores truly," came the rejoinder of the Soledad deputy. "It's goin' to be a case of gun agin gun, looks like. Boys," he addressed the crowd, "stand clear. Wait till you see me topple before yuh start slingin' lead. But I reckon I'll tame that hombre pronto. Put away yore rope, yuh won't need it. You that's in this posse, stand over there where yuh c'n pot him if I go under. Wait a minute! Don't open that door yet."

The obstruction against the entrance had been scraped downward. The noise ceased.

"Farrar, I'm comin' in shootin'!" called the deputy. "So get yore old smokewagon in shape to say hello!"

There was a pause, a tense moment of silence in which only the sound of the rain and the wind was audible. In this interval—perhaps devised purposely by Jimmy Orr to give Farrar a chance to figure it out, the man from Utah got the idea that the young deputy was not as hostile as he pretended. Had he planned to come through the door shooting, he certainly would not have told his antagonist that fact in advance. As it was, the man coming through the doorway would be at a decided disadvantage against a foe in an open room. The latter could spot the entering duellist easily, whereas the one in the gloom of the office would be hard to find.

Jimmy Orr was telling Zack Farrar in an indirect way that he was not coming into the jail to kill him, nor even to attempt that feat. As further proof of this, the deputy spoke once more:

"Open her up, boys! Get all set, Farrar! And don't forget the sheriff showed me that letter from the marshal!"

This last could not have been uttered with any object other than to let the Thunderbolt know Jimmy was fully aware of his real identity.

The heavy brace against the door crashed to the ground. An opening appeared for an instant facing the street, in which the throng was dimly visible.

Jimmy Orr bolted through the entrance with his six-shooter belching lead.

CHAPTER XIII

"Here I Am!"

THE THUNDERBOLT had not returned the deputy's fire, for the simple reason that he trusted Jimmy Orr in this crisis. The cowboy stood at the rear wall, however, with his six-shooter in hand, ready to use it if the outlaws made a rush in the wake of Orr.

The Soledad deputy had not shot blindly. From the first report Farrar had perceived that Orr was not even firing low enough to hit him by mistake. His gun was blazing overhead, the jets of flame from the muzzle of his weapon telling plainly he was shooting into the ceiling. Thus was Farrar's surmise verified—Sheriff Willot's youthful deputy had come here not as a foe but a friend.

Jimmy Orr could not see the Utah buckaroo, of course, for the room was still in pitch darkness and no light was shed from the street, in spite of the fact that the front door was now ajar.

"Come on, pronto, to the rear!" called the deputy, in an undertone. "I've got the key!"

The stratagem of the Soledad officer was plain enough. He must have thought it all out carefully in advance. At the time the sheriff was slain he had been somewhere up the street. He had returned in a hurry, with the crowd, including Jerome's followers who had been waiting for this thing in the Broken Bow. Jimmy Orr's confidence in the Utah man had been unshaken.

But he dared not expose the outlaws openly in front of the crowd, when they were holding Farrar captive in the office. The outlaws were, with the exception of one or two citizens, the only armed men in the mob. They would have turned their guns promptly on the Soledad deputy had they dreamed he was aware of their real identity. Thus Jimmy Orr had bided his time to get into the office with the Thunderbolt and open up the back way to escape.

How well he had calculated this move was shown by the manner in which he staged it, even to the detail of firing as he entered the room. He knew he must clear the rear end of the jail. By pulling the fake gunfight at the front of the building he knew he would draw the last of the renegades from the back. These would come to the street on the jump, ready to lend a hand in subduing the Thunderbolt.

This is exactly what happened now, and with Jimmy Orr in possession of a key that would open the door at the end of the corridor the way was clear for escape.

But flight was farthest from the thoughts of the Thunderbolt. He had come into Arizona to settle the account with Tricks Jerome for the murder of his bosom friend, Bill Teasdale, fellow deputy of Yellow Basin County, Utah. Jerome was present now; the opportunity might not come again for weeks, if at all, to face the notorious killer, and while Tricks Jerome had a band of perhaps a dozen men with him, it was more than Farrar could hope for to find the outlaw chief without his following.

It is true that the jerkline buckaroo had tried to leave the improvised prison via the back door when he found the front entrance barred; but he had not done this to flee from Soledad and leave the outlaws in possession of the town. He had been willing to use the back door only in the expectation of returning by a surprise sally to use his guns against the renegades around the corner of the building.

Further, he had considered the rear exit only because the front was secured by some bulwark that prevented its opening to the street. Had he been able to force the front door he would have fought a battle on lines already determined upon. And since the barrier was now removed, the way was clear for him to face the outlaws.

He knew also that escape now with Jimmy Orr would compromise the Soledad deputy in the eyes of the outlaws as well as his fellow citizens. The renegades would wreak vengeance upon the deputy who had tricked them, and even his townsmen would accuse Orr of traitorous conduct in aiding the one suspected as a notorious killer.

There was still another important reason why flight was not to be considered. If he ran away from his foes he would not only fail to uphold the Thunderbolt's reputation for fearlessness; he would leave the renegades in the saddle in Soledad. They would learn speedily of Tug Blucher's night expedition with supplies for Golden. They would nip in the bud the freighter's preparations to get the shipment through. At this very moment Blucher probably was either arranging for the supplies or was an interested spectator of this scene in front of the sheriff's office, wondering whether it would be safe to carry out his plan.

Hence it was that Zack Farrar did not follow Jimmy Orr through the darkened corridor toward the rear of the jail. Instead, he stepped quickly past the body of the slain sheriff. Jutting from his two hip pockets were the guns of Bert DeWees and Cougar Jackaree, which he had confiscated earlier that day. In his left hand was the weapon of the murdered sheriff and in his right his own well-worn Colt.

These were all forty-fives. The thirty-eight, the murder gun which had taken the life of Willot, he had replaced on the floor where it had been hurled through the window by Jerome. The voice of the Thunderbolt cracked like a whip-lash above the swish of the rain:

"I've got yore volunteer deputy a prisoner in this room! In another minute I'm comin' out a-smokin'. Thunderbolt speakin'!"

His distinct, sharply-enunciated words would be heard by Jimmy Orr, he knew. The deputy, by this time in the act of unlocking the back door, would be surprised at this move; yet Farrar did not doubt he would open the door for emergencies and then hasten to lend a hand to the job the Thunderbolt had decided to undertake. Foolhardy that attempt might seem to Orr, but the Soledad deputy could be counted upon to play the game when he realized what Farrar was about.

A rush of feet had followed the Thunderbolt's threat. A goodly portion of the mob was getting under cover—most of the citizens who were unarmed. This Farrar had counted upon, clearing the way for handling those with guns, mainly the renegades, for on such short notice few of the townsmen would be with weapons.

Since the sound of the running feet had come almost wholly from Farrar's right, he knew now for certain that the outlaws were to his left. Jimmy Orr's last move before he had entered the office was to bunch the "possemen" in one place. This he must have done knowing it would be easier to pick out the renegades thus if a battle had to be fought, in case the intended escape miscarried.

Now Farrar glided to the partly opened door and with his boot shoved it wide. He stepped back swiftly toward the center of the room.

He flattened to the floor, expecting a fusillade of lead, in spite of the darkness of the interior. Such of the citizens who might be armed would not fire so long as they believed Jimmy Orr was in that room, in danger of being shot by a general fire. This was the reason the cowboy had pretended the deputy was his captive. But Jerome would not hesitate. With only the guns of the outlaws to fear, however, Farrar was satisfied.

The fusillade of Jerome's band came just as the Thunderbolt had guessed; the heavy slugs zoomed at the center height of a man, passing over the prostrate cowboy, who, for further protection, rolled quickly to one side of the open door in the blackness. Out of range, he leaped to his feet.

The direction of the firing verified the position of the hold-up gang to Farrar's left. At last the Thunderbolt was ready.

His voice again ripped out a warning and a threat:

"You can't see me, hombres—but I can see you! Hands up—all around! I'm goin' to shoot the man that has 'em down when I come out. Here I am!"

He jumped into the open doorway, a gun in each hand.

CHAPTER XIV

DEWEES' DISCOVERY

THIS daring venture of the Thunderbolt, while fraught with peril, was not so rash as it appeared at first glance. The Utah buckaroo had been hidden from view of the outlaws. They, on the other hand, had been in the glare of the street light, in spite of the downpour of rain. Thus, while the oil lamp in front of the sheriff's office exposed most of the renegades, the light was not sufficient to penetrate beyond the door of the sheriff's office.

After the fusillade of shots into the darkened room, the outlaws expected no attack from either the Thunderbolt or Orr. Had they counted upon Farrar escaping their fire they might have sought better cover in the shadows of the doorways and passages across the street. But they were confident their superior numbers and more withering gunfire would keep the buckaroo in subjection, if not wound or kill him.

Yet Farrar's command to them to raise their hands could not be mistaken, for his voice was both loud and distinct. And when he had warned them he would shoot down any who did not obey, the words had come as a distinct shock. They knew he could see most of them from the dark interior of the office. This, more than his sudden appearance in the doorway, caused the six directly in line with the opening to raise their arms in haste.

As the Thunderbolt cleared the entrance to the sidewalk he saw instantly that those nearest him were standing in an attitude of non-resistance and he gave them little thought, his sole attention centering upon the bunch farther to his left, where they had backed on hearing his ultimatum. In the light of the street lamp Farrar saw these in motion. Three of them were traveling to reach the cover of the passage adjoining the jail. Three others raised their weapons in unison, to catch him in the light of the lamp.

A crash of exploding forty-fives marked the buckaroo's appearance. Two weaving Colts were tattooing their messengers of battle in the hands of Farrar. He was making good on his threat to shoot down any who refused to raise his arms. In the downpour he saw two of the renegades stagger and fall. The third had got in one squeeze of the trigger at the zigzagging figure that had leaped from the office. The renegade's bullet ripped away a portion of the cowboy's shirt collar. The Thunderbolt knocked him flat with charges from both six-shooters at once.

Now Farrar leaped for the passage behind which the other three had taken refuge, among them Tricks Jerome himself. With his right gun turned to face the six who still held their hands over their heads, he traveled swiftly toward the narrow space between buildings, his chief object to mark the diminutive figure of Jerome the killer. If he could but bag the murderer of Teasdale it would not matter much what happened to himself.

During this swift exchange of shots, all of which had taken place in a matter of seconds, Farrar had had no time to think of Jimmy Orr nor to wonder why the Soledad deputy had not lent a hand against the outlaws. He was to learn in another moment that Jimmy Orr was not idle. Farrar was within a few yards of the corner of the passage when a burst of gunfire sounded from the rear end of the passage, around toward the back of the jail. He knew immediately that the deputy was swinging into action there, attacking the renegades who lay in wait for the Thunderbolt.

The news was almost too good to be true. Jimmy Orr's sally was placing Tricks Jerome and his two gunmen between two fires, with the Utah deputy ready to smash forth his forty-five pellets from the front.

But a complication arose at this juncture that only Farrar's crafty preparedness detected. One of the six who had held their hands overhead yelled suddenly for battle. The jerkline guard recognized the voice as that of Cougar Jackaree, a fact that told him the horse thieves—part of the band at least—had come into Soledad with Jerome.

The Thunderbolt swept both guns around instantly upon the sextette who were on the verge of obeying the cry of Jackaree for attack. In doing this he realized he was risking the fire of the men in the passage, if these three came forth at this moment. Thus, while temporarily he had halted the attempt of the six to aid their companions in the passage, he was compelled to back hurriedly again to the darkened office of the sheriff. He reached the door, guns still on the men with Jackaree.

Abruptly there was a rush of booted feet in two directions. Tricks Jerome flung himself out from his hiding place, firing at the street light as he did so. The lamp crashed into darkness and in the gloom that overspread street and passage the entire outlaw band took flight.

Three of the renegades had fallen in front of the jail in the encounter, yet the Thunderbolt's teeth gritted as he realized Tricks Jerome was not among these. He bolted out again into the street in pursuit. Hearing a man running behind him, he turned with gun rising, not daring to fire for fear the unseen one might be Jimmy Orr.

"Farrar!"

It was the Soledad deputy, his boots sloshing through the mud of the passage. The Thunderbolt was at his side in another moment. "Come on!" called Farrar. "They've got their horses somewheres back of that corral lot!" He turned his course in the direction of the spot where he had seen the animals when he had entered town. Jimmy Orr was immediately behind him.

They broke into a rapid sprint, but fast as they traveled they could not overcome the start of the outlaws. The latter had posted their horses, saddled and ready to go, as a precautionary measure, for a quick getaway in case anything went awry. They had now taken advantage of their foresight.

"Well, they're gone, and you licked the tar out uh them," commented Jimmy Orr. "But that won't bring back pore Henry Willot. I got one in that alleyway. How many did you leave layin' in the street?"

"Three. But the one I wanted most is still in the saddle," replied Zack Farrar, bitterly. The two young fighters had taken refuge from the downpour under a projecting sidewalk awning. "I don't aim to quit. If I thought they'd come back, I'd stick here. But I reckon they've gone to their hangout at Red Rock tradin' post. I'll hit for there to-night."

The jerkline buckaroo started up the street toward the hitch-rack where he had left his horse. "I ought to have a fresh pony. You reckon you could get one from the corral keeper for me, leavin' mine for security?"

"Jest a minute. You recollect there was three men came out that alleyway in spite of me gettin' one of the three that was there?"

Farrar could not be sure, since the street lamp had been shot out about that time.

"Well, three came out. Reason of it was that another one jined them a minute before I got into the shoot. This hombre came up in a hurry and I heard him tell Jerome that bullion wasn't gold, but lead."

"That was DeWees," declared the cowboy, much interested. "What did Jerome say about that?"

"He swore like a trooper. Findin' that out is one reason he jumped the town in such a hurry. 'If that shipment was phoney,' I heard him say, 'then the gold is on the second wagon train.' He swore that he'd get that twenty thousand before this night was over."

This put a different aspect on things entirely. Farrar had not forgotten about the well armed train the colonel was sending from Golden. The outfit was due in Soledad near midnight. The fact that Tricks Jerome was aware of the second shipment showed how thoroughly he was being informed about what was happening in Golden. Perhaps the crooked sheriff there was acting as informer.

It spoke well for Colonel Eaton's precautionary measures, however, that the lookout, whoever he was, did not know which of the outfits had carried the bullion. This was not surprising, since Farrar himself thought the two boxes he had guarded were the gold containers.

"That'll make it some easier for me to find the bunch again," commented the buckaroo, grimly. "I won't have to go all the way to Red Rock tradin' post. Now for a fresh horse in a hurry! I'll let you straighten out folks here about the Thunderbolt and the real criminals. Tell Tug Blucher to start with those supplies like we originally planned."

"I'm honin' to go with you, Farrar. Any objections?"

"There's nobody I'd rather have. But you've got a job of yore own here—with the sheriff dead and all. Besides, this killer has threatened to shoot down anybody that joins me in the man-hunt."

"Come with me. I'm goin'," insisted the Soledad deputy. "You take Henry Willot's horse, I'll take my own. There's a pair of slickers hangin' in the sheriff's office; we'll need 'em in this storm."

The downpour, combined with the hot exchange of gunfire in front of the jail, had temporarily depopulated the center of town. Now a few of the most venturesome were returning to appraise the damage and to look after the body of the fallen sheriff. Chief of these was Assayer Ty Graham. The two deputies hurried over among the five men, who had taken shelter in the sheriff's office.

Sam Ganz, proprietor of the mercantile establishment, crossed the street at this juncture with Tug Blucher. He arrived in time to hear Jimmy Orr's explanation of what had happened.

"That posse was a fake; those hombres are the road agents," the deputy insisted. "Tricks Jerome killed the sheriff and laid it onto Farrar. The outlaws put up those circulars accusin' Farrar as the Utah killer when the fact is Jerome's that hombre hisself. Ty, I'm acting sheriff and I appoint you deputy in my absence while I jine Farrar in a hunt for this gang."

The jerkline guard talked with Sam Ganz earnestly for some minutes, offering out of his own pocket a bonus of a hundred dollars over the colonel's check if he would load up the flour, coffee, sugar and sundries immediately. Golden was in a sorry plight for lack of these things, since the outlaws had been waylaying all freighter trains. Ganz agreed to send Blucher on his way within the hour.

Then the Thunderbolt and Jimmy Orr, wearing rain-proof slickers, mounted two good horses and traveled out into the black and stormy night on the Soledad-Golden trail.

CHAPTER XV

Red Rock Corrals

"IT'S shorely one heck of a night to be out," commented Jimmy, huddling like a pale yellow ball in the folds of his lemon-colored slicker. "If it wasn't they assassinated pore Henry Willot thataway I'd let 'em ride—far as the gold is concerned. But I'm shorely proud to be a side-kick uh the Utah Thunderbolt."

Farrar did not like praise he considered unmerited. In spite of the rout of the outlaws he counted the battle in Soledad a failure.

"Means four less we got to swap lead with anyhow," went on Jimmy Orr. "I reckon that oney leaves eight or nine."

"There's likely more," affirmed the Thunderbolt. "Cougar Jackaree got into that bunch somehow." He explained how Jackaree had been encountered on the trail earlier that day with the stolen horses of the Triple V. "The others of that bunch of thieves will likely meet up with Jerome's outfit before the night is over."

The Soledad deputy whistled softly. "You know who Jackaree is, don't yuh?" he queried.

"Only what I found out when I stole his gun to-day."

"He's our pet cattle rustler that's been raisin' Cain for more'n a year with the ranch outfits," informed the deputy. "He don't belong to that Utah bunch, but it's a cinch from what you said he's pitched in with that Utah killer. I reckon his band is bigger than Jerome's. That don't look so invitin'—him j'inin' the other gang! What's yore idee how we better handle 'em?"

They brought their horses to the edge of a racing stream of flood water that had severed the trail. With difficulty they got their mounts across.

The Thunderbolt explained the three things he had set out to accomplish, in the order of their importance. First, he intended to capture or shoot the murderer of Teasdale; second, he planned to join the wagon train containing the bullion shipment and to see that the gold got safely through. He would probably have to do the last-named job first, leaving the most important task until later. Third, he intended to act as guard on Tug Blucher's jerkline supply outfit.

"If we run into the bullion train, which ought to be along any minute now, we can turn back with 'em, and about the time the train reaches Soledad, Blucher ought to be startin' with the supplies. If Tricks misses the gold shipment he'll likely take it out on Tug."

"I reckon Golden is in a bad way for them supplies," agreed the Soledad deputy. "That camp sets up there on a rock above High mesa. Every danged thing that's et in that burg except beef and sheep has to be freighted in from Soledad. Nothin' has got through for a month, I understand."

The trail was sandy and muddy and here and there running with flood waters. The horses' hoofs sank into the mud hock deep where the going was best, and deeper in the softer water-soaked ground. Slow progress was made on this stretch, but the going would be better when the rocky foothill stretch was reached. Jimmy Orr, more familiar with this part of the trail, took the lead in the blackness. The rain continued steadily.

"Arroyo will shore be a boomin' river if this keeps up," remarked Jimmy Orr. "I'm wonderin' if that bullion train makes it through."

The Thunderbolt too had begun to wonder about this complication. It would be hard enough for horses to ford the freshets. With a wagon the difficulties would be multiplied, especially if the flood waters became high enough to carry boulders and other débris onto the trail.

"Might be Jerome will figger on the wagon outfit stallin' in the flood," mused Jimmy. "Better goin' is right ahead. We'll let these ponies out a spell."

Within a few minutes the firm footing of the foothills was reached and both horses were then urged into a fast lope.

This continued for a half hour except for occasional breaks in the gait due to freshets. Now the rain ceased as suddenly as it had begun, holes of blue appeared in the sky overhead, openings in the clouds that were studded with brilliant stars.

The pair crossed a ridge leading toward the big arroyo. Since the rain had been so copious, of a nature almost justifying the common designation of cloudburst in that region, it was to be expected that the arroyo would be in bad shape for travel. Farrar's one hope was that the storm had been less severe on the far side of the hills.

These hopes were to be blasted. Both men halted at once, at a thunderous sound in the distance. A young Niagara was pouring from the Rubies down into the canyon of which the arroyo formed the mouth.

"No use to try to make it," said Jimmy Orr, in awed tones. "Besides, if that outfit got into the arroyo at the time this storm started the whole shebang has been washed away like it was a load uh hay!"

The jerkline buckaroo considered this probability. There was but one hope that the bullion carriers had escaped. Since the weather had been threatening all afternoon and since they were at least three hours behind Tug Blucher's team, they might have gone the desert route, risking the dry Rabbit River rather than the arroyo. Rabbit River too would be dangerous, but not so risky as the big wash.

"What's that?" Jimmy Orr whirled in the saddle. Both men listened intently. There was no mistake! Faintly in the distance came the sound of hoofbeats.

"Tricks Jerome!" said the deputy, huskily. "Git set!"

"Come on." The Thunderbolt turned his mount and galloped in the direction of the sound, the Soledad deputy following. For a time the rush of hootbeats became more distinct, then slowly died away.

The two men drew up. "They're travelin' south," said Farrar. "Either they've got a hunch the bullion was comin' by the desert trail or they got a definite tip to that effect from the rest of the band. We'll hit for there pronto!"

Again the riders pressed their mounts forward, returning across the foothills toward the dreary stretch of sand that extended beyond the Devil's Corkscrew. The clouds dissipated rapidly, until with the exception of a few spots all the heavens were a velvet dome of blue, dotted with specks of shining diamonds. Even in the absence of the moon the night became gray with starlight, making near objects visible. Able to pick their trail, the two horsemen made good progress.

A certain feeling of misgiving came over Farrar about the presence of Jimmy Orr, as he recalled the threat of Jerome to kill any man who joined the Thunderbolt in the man-hunt. The Soledad deputy had insisted firmly on joining the chase, of course, but even so Farrar would not have assented but for one reason. He knew the Thunderbolt was a marked man, that the posters had been put up in Golden containing his description and photo. Thus the bullion guards would be hostile to Farrar if he came to warn them of the road agents and to join them in the defense. Only Deputy Orr could convince them of the Thunderbolt's real identity as an officer of Utah.

"Red Rock tradin' post cain't be far off the trail this direction," suggested Farrar. "Might be that bunch is headed there, after already havin' stuck up the bullion train."

"Good idee," declared Orr. "Anyhow, we c'n find out mighty soon. Tradin' post is plumb on the way to Rabbit River trail."

The Soledad deputy, knowing the country more intimately than the Thunderbolt, set a straight course for the trading post. Within three-quarters of an hour the pair slowed down to a cautious walk at a point on the desert where a water well and windmill were visible beside a small butte of reddish rock composition. Then a larger object came into view, a structure out of keeping with its surroundings.

The place breathed an air both of mystery and outlawry. A huge rectangular adobe building too pretentious for any dwelling was in itself suspicious in this barren waste of cactus and sand, since there was no legitimate business here to warrant such an establishment. The Indian reservation was a hundred miles away; as a trading post the place was certainly a misnomer. To Zack Farrar the establishment seemed like an inn, a hangout for rustlers and their kind, a far removed round-up point for stolen stock, horses, cattle and sheep. A huge network of cedar-pole corrals fronted the adobe on the east. The odor of moonshine was strong on the night wind.

CHAPTER XVI

Fate of a Freighter

JESSIE VERDIN'S prize herd of Morgans were in those corrals, penned in one of the enclosures nearest to the adobe.

Except for these there was no sign of life about the place. The Thunderbolt dismounted and hammered loudly at the door.

"Who'n Hades is knockin'?" came a drowsy voice from the interior. "Why'n heck don't yuh come in?"

Zack Farrar went in. His gun was in his hand, but that fact was not evident to the sole occupant of the big room. As the cowboy's eyes became accustomed to the gloom of the interior he made out the form of a man rising from a bunk in the corner. The trading post denizen staggered from his bed of ease and moved to the table, on which a lamp was standing. He struck a match, lit the lamp, and stared groggily at the buckaroo before him. "Who are yuh?" he wanted to know.

"The Thunderbolt."

"The Th—!" Suddenly the slow brain of the renegade divekeeper awoke. He swiped at the lamp globe, knocked the glass to the floor, and his fingers snuffed the light.

In the ensuing darkness Farrar heard the man running. "Stop!" he shot out, warningly.

For answer the divekeeper fired. At that instant Jimmy Orr, entering the room, leaped upon the renegade. There was a quick shuffle, and when the Thunderbolt bounded to the spot, Jimmy Orr was sprawling backward from a blow from the outlaw's six-shooter. Farrar and the stranger locked.

Jimmy Orr struggled to his feet as the two men rolled over on the floor, each trying for the other's throat. The buckaroo had the divekeeper down and his fingers tightened about the other's neck. With his left hand he snatched the renegade's gun, tossed it from him. Deputy Jimmy Orr jumped into the fray, only to hear the cowboy's command:

"Get up!"

"Light that lamp again, Jimmy," instructed the cowboy, as the divekeeper obeyed the command to rise. When that was done Farrar drove the stranger back to his bunk. "Sit down and tell us what you know," he snapped. "Where's Tricks Jerome?"

The whiskey-shot eyes of the trading post denizen were filled with dread. "I didn't know yuh was the real Thunderbolt," he whined. "I figgered yuh was that road agent—"

"Don't lie to me, or I'll drill you!"

"Aw, hell, then I'll talk," said the other hastily. "I dunno where he is. Him an' Cougar left yere early in the evenin'. Bert was in, too, an' left. That's all I know, honest Injun!"

"What way did Bert go?" demanded the cowboy.

"Him an' his two amigos lit out south."

This was enough, showing that all three of the outlaw groups were working in agreement. Time was precious and Farrar saw that the divekeeper knew little more of value. With a rope from a saddle in the corner the buckaroo tied the man hand and foot, to prevent the spreading of an alarm. Then he went out hurriedly with the deputy and entered the corrals.

Opening the gate of the enclosure containing the Morgans, he fired his six-shooter and stampeded the herd through the opening, while Jimmy Orr stood just outside and turned the animals west, in the general direction of George Verdin's Triple V.

"So far so good," grinned the Soledad deputy.

"We'll be movin'." The Thunderbolt sprinted for his horse, mounted, and with the deputy he set off toward Rabbit River.

It was now after midnight. Although normally the ore train that carried the bullion would have reached Soledad about this hour, it was almost certain that the detour had been made to the desert route. Otherwise the team would be tied up in the arroyo if not destroyed. Farrar and his companion played their hunch that the train had taken the southern trail, largely on the strength of the sounds of the renegades' horses an hour previously.

Although the man from Utah did not know the exact nature of the outfit that was carrying the bullion he assumed from what Jessie Verdin had said that it was another ore train, not only because there was a big surplus of mineral-bearing rock to be transported to the smelter, but because Colonel Eaton was anxious to use the "empties" on the return to bring in provisions for the general store, which his company operated with the mines.

Farrar and Orr had rolled up their slickers and tucked them beneath their saddle cantles, for though the night was crisp and cool following the storm, the long coats were burdensome for fast travel. The desert lay level as a floor to southward, damp from the rain, the pungent smell of the creosote bushes and sage doubly exhilarating. Farrar had not had a bite to eat since the sandwich fare of the previous noontime on the freighter and of course no sleep, but he was not fatigued. The zest of the chase made all his senses keenly alert.

Both riders kept a sharp lookout on either side in the starlit waste and their ears were attuned for every strange sound, particularly that of moving hoofs. The Rabbit River trail was not well beaten, but the most accustomed place of crossing the river bed in flood time was now near at hand, according to Orr. The riders became more watchful with every minute.

Thus they were prompt to detect an approaching horseman at the instant the starlight haze permitted. "Spread out, Jimmy," directed Farrar, quickly, to make sure the rider did not swerve aside and give them the slip.

The two officers separated a hundred yards and as the rider continued ahead they suddenly drew in together, commanding him to halt.

The stranger did so, raising his hands promptly.

"Who are you and where are you travelin'?" demanded Farrar.

"Mose Hornaday, who ain't done any man or critter harm," returned the rider. "I ain't even got a gun. They took it. If you gents are friends of the Thunderbolt, I'm askin' you to let me ride without doin' me harm."

"We're officers," returned Jimmy Orr promptly. "You with that freighter outfit, was you?"

"Ye-es. If you're officers, I don't mind statin' I'm on the way to see the sheriff."

"The sheriff has been killed," said Orr. "I'm his deputy."

Mose Hornaday heaved a sigh of relief. "I was afeared you was stringin' me about bein' officers. The freighter was held up —team was drowned and two men killed by the Thunderbolt's gang—shot down in cold blood when they was tryin' to get the team out of the river. It jest happened.

"Poor Jake and Haskins, the driver, didn't have a chance the way that gang fired into 'em. Us that was guardin' the outfit, bein' in the saddle alongside, got across the river first and that's what saved us, I reckon, the wagons bein' stuck in the middle of the river, which was the highest I ever seen it, and I've lived in Oro County for nigh on twenty years—"

"Shot two of yore men to death and got the bullion, did they?" broke in the Thunderbolt, his jaw squaring and his temples bulging in anger at this latest crime.

"Not the bullion—leastwise, I don't reckon so. It was thisaway. The six-span was bein' jerklined acrost the Rabbit River, which is dry as a bone mostly, but which I swear was as big as the Colorado to-night, in spots. It was worse than even us figured that knows how tricky these cloudbursts can be. Well, lackin' half way acrost the team couldn't budge. Us guards got over safe and throwed a line back to the wagon, thinkin' to help pull her out. But the six-span was losin' their footin' every minute.

"That was the fix we was in when this Thunderbolt's bunch starts shootin' from the mesquite. Haskins, the driver, goes down first, then Jake Parker, one of us guards, was shot off his horse out of his saddle. The rest of us lit out, but at that minute along came the posse, drivin' the Thunderbolt's gang back onto the desert."

"What posse?" demanded Jimmy Orr, sharply.

"Why, your posse—from Soledad, of course. They arrove jest too late to capture that gang, but they saved the bullion."

A bitter laugh escaped the Thunderbolt. They had "saved" the bullion! Thus had Trick Jerome again executed a stroke of cunning that would be hard to duplicate in the annals of Arizona.

Zack Farrar and Jimmy Orr exchanged glances. Of course what had happened was very plain to them both. Jerome's band had swooped down upon the marooned wagon team and had opened fire, needlessly and wantonly, with no other reason than to terrorize the remaining guards into submission. They had promptly turned about in the brush and pretended to be coming to the rescue, making it appear they had driven the "Thunderbolt" off.

Then they had leisurely helped themselves to the gold, under the pretense that they would guard its safe delivery!

"Yeh, it was too bad the posse didn't arrive a couple minutes quicker," went on Mose Hornaday. "They'd 'a' spared the lives of Jake and Haskins. But it was lucky they came in time to save about twenty-five thousand in gold. Soon as they recovered the bullion boxes off of the wagons, which were sinkin' in the stream flood mighty fast, they sent me as a messenger to the sheriff at Soledad to break the news of the hold-up."

"What way did they go?" Farrar asked.

"Back to Golden. They figured it was too risky to take another chance agin the Thunderbolt's gang by tryin' to make it to Soledad, which is the direction the road agents went."

The cowboy's jaw locked as he considered his next move. Tricks Jerome's wolfish ferocity and foxlike cunning could not be denied. In Soledad he had posed successfully as leader of a posse from Golden. Now he was posing before the Golden freighter guards as leader of a posse from Soledad! In this rôle he might actually attempt to enter the town of Golden openly.

"Oh, yes, I forgot to mention that Sheriff Bill Bishop and two men came along, too, a couple minutes later, and they pitched in with the Soledad boys. They've all taken the trail of the Thunderbolt, figurin' that devil went toward his hang-out near Golden."

In few words Zack Farrar told Mose Hornaday how he and his fellow guards had been duped. "But you might as well ride ahead to Soledad and spread the alarm. Maybe you can stir up the citizens there to organize a real posse and start after this bunch."

Mose Hornaday, an amazed and much disturbed guard, agreed to do what he could in rousing the Soledad populace to action.

The Thunderbolt and Jimmy Orr started post-haste toward the scene of the latest hold-up. It was too late to do more than to pick up the trail of the renegades.

Where the flood waters of the "dry" Rabbit River raced in whitish fury down the wide wash they halted. One of the wagons was visible at the edge of the stream, sunk deep in the mud with its ore-load overturned. It had been washed to this point from the center of the torrent. The dark hulks of two horses were visible on the banks farther down—nothing more.

"I reckon the other guards joined that fake posse," mused Jimmy Orr. "It wouldn't surprise me none if the whole shebang galloped into Golden before daylight with that cock-and-bull story, led by the crooked sheriff of Oro County and Tricks Jerome himself."

"They'd do that," agreed Farrar, "if there was anything special to gain."

"There'd be plenty to gain. They'd likely start in robbin' the stamps. There's always a bunch of amalgam in the Ingot mill, gold and quicksilver—sometimes ten-fifteen thousand dollars before the clean-up. That would sweeten the pot. Besides, this stuff that had been molded into bars wouldn't be all that was in the retort house, likely."

"I believe you're right, at that," said the Thunderbolt, grimly. "Tricks Jerome wouldn't overlook a bet like this, when he's got things goin' his own way. I tell you what we'd better do, there not bein' enough light to read sign on this bunch's trail. How'd you like to ride to Golden? You're known there well enough to be believed. Go to Colonel Eaton with the whole story. I'll turn back and meet Blucher with the supplies and see that he gets through. Tell the colonel to lock up his mill and lay low till I come. We'll make it before noon."

The deputy saw the wisdom of this program, knowing a quick ride was necessary to thwart further plans of the robbers. He knew also the mining camp would be depopulated in a few days unless this supply train got through. With a firm handshake he took his leave of the Thunderbolt.

Zack Farrar rode back to meet Blucher. He knew Tug would take the desert trail, being familiar with the condition of the arroyo route after such a storm.

He did not have far to go. The grizzled freighter was cracking his blacksnake lustily to drive his new team to the utmost, counting upon night travel to get him through safely. He was a much surprised driver when the young buckaroo broke the news.

"The river down thar will be low enough to cross by the time we git thar," he predicted, puffing tranquilly on his pipe. "Water goes down quick as she goes up. You do the guardin', Zack, an' I'll handle the jerkline for all she's wuth."

Again the big whip emitted its pistol-like report and the seven-span pulled at the two heavily-laden wagons.

Soon the river was reached, but to gain further time both in crossing and in shortening the distance, Tug Blucher followed the stream some distance farther north. With each few minutes the water was receding. In less than half an hour Blucher manipulated the jerkline and turned the team into a river that was less than half a wheel in depth.

Farrar rode beside the mounted driver. Two-thirds across, Tug Blucher suddenly leaped from the wheel-horse into the shallow stream. "Jump!" he yelled, hoarsely, as he flopped in the water, raised in stooping posture and raced for the opposite bank.

Zack Farrar's gun tilted and his eyes searched for the object or objects that had thrown the freighter into a panic of self-preservation. The team was still moving forward, as was the cowboy's horse. To abandon the supply train at this stage, when so much depended upon it, did not occur to Farrar. As the horses halted, uncertain of their course, the buckaroo left his pony and swung over to the wheel-horse, seizing the jerkline.

At that instant six men rose from the mesquite lining the embankment. Leveled rifles and six-shooters were in their hands. "If yuh fire," drawled one, "we'll kill yore amigo, Jimmy Orr, like a coyote, he bein' our pris-ner. Stick up the paws, Mister Thunderbolt—pronto!"

The speaker was Jerome. The jerkline buckaroo obeyed the injunction, although the act was against his every instinct. He would have fought it out in spite of the leveled guns but for the threat pertaining to Jimmy Orr.

CHAPTER XVII

Jerk and Pull

IN another moment the Thunderbolt was disarmed, losing not only his own gun but those he had taken from others. Tricks Jerome was crafty enough to overlook no part of the buckaroo's person that would have concealed a weapon.

Now he laid back his head and laughed in high-pitched glee. "Knowed that racket about yore deppity friend would work, Farrar! We filled that little sneak full uh lead a half a hour ago. Only reason we didn't do the same with you afore this, us bein' on yore tail all the time, is becose we got a special trick we aim to pull."

Passing out the extra guns among his fellow outlaws, the Utah killer continued to hold one of his own pair in his right hand. "Fellow possemen," he addressed his companions, with a chuckle, "help yoreselves to this gent's hoss an' saddle. I reckon yuh all know the lay. Go jine up with the sheriff an' his bunch an' hit fer Golden. Yo'll have the run uh the camp. Wait fer me, which will be sometime afore noon. Take good keer o' yoreselves, amigos!"

He whipped his gun around upon the person of the Thunderbolt. "Yo're settin' right pretty," he laughed, cheerily. "Stay where yuh are, forkin' that air wheel-hoss. Now yuh kin play jerkline buckaroo for yores truly. I aim to go with yuh as a passenger." He swung up upon the seat of the forward wagon.

"Git along with yuh an' rassle that jerkline, amigo. I'm in a mighty hurry to git this thing over with!" He pressed the trigger by way of encouragement to the horses and the loud report duplicated the sound of a number of blacksnakes in unison. The team got under way.

The wagons were hauled up over the low embankment with a rush and the supply outfit ploughed into the sandy waste.

Up to this time Zack Farrar had not spoken a word. His feelings had been stirred to their depths by the declaration that Jimmy Orr had been shot down. The lie concerning the presence of the deputy had not caught him wholly unawares, but he dared not risk the chance that Orr was a captive of the renegades and would be slain if the Thunderbolt showed resistance. The treachery of Jerome could not better be exemplified than by this act of assassination, followed by the ghoulish use of the victim's name to trap his friend.

Steadily the freighter advanced through the starlit sand and scrub growth. Farrar's wits were alert; he tried to think of some plan by which to turn the tables on the outlaw. But with Jerome double armed and seated above his head and behind, he realized he was for the time being at the killer's mercy.

He could not conceive of a motive for the outlaw's act in thus accompanying him with the supplies. It was certain the team was moving farther away each minute from the remainder of the hold-up contingent, for while Jerome had commanded them to ride to Golden, Farrar had noticed the riders had taken a course to the northward. Undoubtedly they were going to pay a visit to Red Rock trading post, their base of operations, on the way.

In among the sand, mesquite and cactus the jerkline buckaroo wound his course, to the accompaniment of frequent bantering remarks from the wagon seat. "Jerk an' pull! Jerk to the right, pull to the left! The Thunderbolt kid is shore a jerkline buckaroo!" chuckled Jerome. "I reckon the boys has filled Tug Blucher's carcass with tin by now! Danged glad he hopped off'n the hoss when he did! It saved me shootin' him down, becose I shore didn't want nobody but me an' you on this little trip, Zackey boy! I'm gittin' squeamish about killin' hombres like Tug, anyhow. But in cases like yores, why, hell, I'd jest as soon plug yuh with my smokin'-iron as eat!"

The Utah deputy did not doubt it. In fact, as the journey progressed he marveled that Jerome had not shot him instead of making him a prisoner as jerkline driver.

"Ain't yuh leadin' kinda south'ard?" demanded the outlaw, good-humoredly, after a time.

The Thunderbolt did not reply.

"Talkative Injun, ain't yuh?" went on the renegade.

The remark did not call for an answer.

"What's the idee of yuh bendin' so fer south'ard?" demanded Jerome, growing ugly.

"You want to take the jerkline?" flung back the driver.

"No, dang yuh—"

"Golden's where yuh ordered me to go, ain't it?" broke in Farrar. "If yuh know the trail better than I do, take the line."

"Jest so yuh don't try no tricks," grunted the renegade, somewhat reassured.

The fact was that the man on the wheel-horse was traveling more to the southward than even the outlaw suspected. Darkness, the absence of the moon and Jerome's ignorance of the constellations left the road agent in ignorance, though he had suspected the direction taken by Farrar was not due west.

No settlement lay to the south short of three hundred miles and the Utah deputy had no hope of leading the killer into a town where he could relate the true story of the night's events. For one thing, the Thunderbolt was trying to delay the arrival of Jerome into Golden, thus possibly postponing the "clean-up" to which he had referred.

The miles receded rapidly for such an outfit. The jerkline buckaroo drove the team forward with frequent pistol-like reports of the blacksnake. Still the outlaw chief did not reveal the object of this strange expedition, nor did he make direct threats to kill Farrar somewhere on this journey. Yet the Thunderbolt was aware that the man on the box might open fire at any moment, when he deemed the freight train was far enough along to suit his purposes.

Another puzzle to the Utah deputy was the failure of Jerome to destroy the supplies. This had been Farrar's first thought after the capture. Why the outlaw was willing to burden the team with the extra load when better time could be made without it he could not guess, particularly since the renegades had made it their business to destroy every shipment of provisions bound for Golden.

"Goin' down hill, ain't we?" grumbled Jerome on one occasion, when the night was near its end with daybreak in the offing.

"You want to take the jerkline?"

"No, damn yuh! But it's the fust time I knowed there was a hollow like this'n between Rabbit River an' Golden!"

"You've got a few things to learn, Jerome."

"Yeah?" the other snarled. "If yuh figger to stall on the trail, Farrar, yo'll die quicker'n yuh think yuh will!"

"Nice of you to say that," retorted the cowboy, lightly.

"It won't be so nice what I'm goin' to do to you, Farrar!"

"Namely?"

"Don't yuh wish yuh knowed?"

"Go on and spill it."

"I aim to tote yuh into Golden a pris'ner so's the posse kin shoot yuh down, me takin' the credit fer capturin' yuh. But fust I aim to cut yore tongue out, so's yuh cain't tell the folks who'n Hades yuh are —an' who I am!"

"Nice of you," admitted the buckaroo.

Tricks Jerome laughed huskily. "Naw, I don't aim to do no deviltry like that, Farrar! It ain't needed. But you wait an' see what's goin' to happen to the Utah Thunderbolt!"

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. I'll have yuh eatin' out uh my hand afore I git through with yuh!"

"Yuh don't say!"

"Yeh, I do. Damn yuh, what are yuh goin' down this long grade fer, anyhow?"

Farrar laughed. He knew the outlaw was as ignorant of the country as he was, perhaps more so, for the reason the buckaroo had taken the desert trail on horseback the evening before. He had not gone this far south, however. "Want the jerkline?" he retorted.

"Naw, I don't. If yuh don't git into Golden afore noon I'm goin' to torture yuh to death, though."

"Nice of you."

"Whoa-a!" snarled the renegade, at the horses. The team brought the wagons to a halt.

"Jerk that line and turn 'em to the right!" commanded the outlaw.

Farrar laughed at him. "Be a heck of a job to make this team climb that bank," he came back. Dimly in the starlight a huge uprise of earth and gravel was in evidence to the right. A projection almost as high was on the left.

"We're on the trail, looks like to me," remarked the buckaroo, dryly.

"We'll dump the load in th' front wagon, ditch th' other, an' make quicker time," decided the outlaw. He jumped to the ground, followed by Farrar, and both commenced throwing over all the provisions from the front wagon.

It took them a half hour to get the sacks of flour, potatoes, beans and like edibles and the stacks of cannd goods out of the wagon. Then the outlaw proceeded to unfasten the rear wagon.

"Git goin' now," snarled Jerome, finally, perspiring from his exertion. "Looks to me like day was breakin' over thataway—east. Soon as we git on the level, turn to the right or I'll drill yuh!"

"Good enough." The freighter team proceeded, minus one wagon.

Dawn broke in the east, at first a faint gray, barely lighter than the heavens overhead. Gradually as the horses wound their way downward the sky became the hue of soft rose, which quickly deepened into the scarlet shafts of sunrise.

The outfit was traveling west now, for the time being silencing the calls of Jerome for a change of course. But this did not last long. The gigantic furrow in which the team wended its way bent northward, then after a time eastward. Where the last corner was met there were two avenues of travel. Farrar took the left one, apparently seeking the western course.

This convolution in the big sink turned into others. The gravel and clay banks grew higher, more winding. Except at rare intervals they shut out all sight of the rim of the great basin in which the Utah buckaroo had deliberately led the wagon train.

"Damn yore fool hide, where'd yuh think yo're goin'?" yelled Tricks Jerome, his swart face reddish mahogany in the flaming sunlight.

"Danged if I ain't lost," drawled the buckaroo, as though the matter were of no consequence.

"Lost!" belched the renegade. "Yuh idjut, don't yuh know we'll bile alive yere in this hot hole if we cain't git out—an' no water—"

"I reckon it shore looks thataway."

"Gimme that jerkline!" howled Jerome, jumping to the ground. "Naw, yuh don't try no tricks like that!" The outlaw's gun covered Farrar before the latter could complete the dismounting move that he intended should hurl him upon the killer.

"Now git down easy-like an' climb onto that gray hoss ahaid uh yore wheel-hoss. Set up on that animile's back—bareback."

With a quick movement Tricks Jerome was astride the near wheel-horse, jerkline and whip in the same hand, while he holstered his weapon. Then he took the whip in one hand and the line in the other and snapped the blacksnake viciously over the heads of the horses.

With Farrar riding directly in front, there was no chance of a break. The outlaw could snatch his gun from his holster at an instant's notice, the cowboy knew. And yet the features of the Thunderbolt held a grim smile.

Around the labyrinthian trails of the sink the road agent guided the outfit. For more than an hour he turned and twisted, taking this fork and that, always finding he was bending the team back upon itself.

"Jerk an' tug," commented Zack Farrar, dryly.

An oath escaped the renegade.

"Yo're a fust-rate jerkline buckaroo yoreself," piped the Thunderbolt, mimicking the inflection of the bandit.

Tricks Jerome's dark visage stood heavy with exuding sweat and white grime from the desert's winding washes. He swore and cracked the whip and swore again. The morning's sun became startlingly hot in this low-sunk furnace of the desert's floor. The outlaw bemoaned the fact that he had not even a whiskey flask to quench his thirst.

Farrar grinned. The rim of the sink was now and again visible, but whenever Jerome halted the team to study the landscape and get his bearings he learned that the basin's edge was too precipitous for exit. To attempt it on foot in this vast stretch of desert would mean death by thirst.

"Too bad we don't have some of those canned goods you dumped. We could live on 'em for a spell," drawled the Thunderbolt. "Horses cain't keep this up much longer, either, looks like."

"Where in hell are we anyhow?" whined the renegade.

"You said it. This is the Devil's Corkscrew."

CHAPTER XVIII

The Lure Ahead

THE truth was that the Utah Thunderbolt was in a quandary himself.

It might take days to find the entrance to the sink through which he had come, days of torture that threatened death from thirst.

Yet he had deliberately come here hoping for just such a hazard. He at least had entrapped the murderer of his pal, Bill Teasdale, not to mention Willot and Orr. He had recalled the location of the Devil's Corkscrew region from what Tug Blucher had said, and when he found himself unarmed, at the mercy of the Utah killer, he had taken a desperate choice.

At first his plan had been to run the freighter train over the rim of the sink, hoping in the ensuing wreck to be able to lock with Jerome in a struggle at close range, without guns. Instead, luck had directed him into one of the two passages leading into the Corkscrew. He had not hesitated to go through with the game at that stage, even if it cost him his own life. Otherwise he would have been slain by the outlaw, he knew.

It was better that both die than that Jerome should escape and continue his career of murder and robbery. Yet the jerkline buckaroo had one more card that might make a flush. He played this card now.

"I reckon my hand is good, Jerome. You'll die here if I don't take you out."

"Yeh?" sneered the outlaw. "Yo'll die too." He leveled a forty-five.

"Likely enough. But that won't get *you* out. You're in a worse fix now tryin' to guide the team than when you started two hours ago."

"No worse'n you," grunted the renegade. "Yo're lost the same as me."

"I reckon I can jerkline this outfit through if I want to," returned the buckaroo with more confidence than he felt. "Hand over yore guns and we'll travel."

"Yeh?" A snarl was in the word. "So yuh know the way out, do yuh! All righto, take the jerkline, Farrar!" The outlaw moved a step closer with the six-shooter at the cowboy's head. "Git me out or I'll blow yore danged head off!"

A meaningful laugh was Farrar's answer. "Shoot away," he invited after a time. "That'll mean yore death warrant, Jerome! You'll die here of a torture worse than the pistol shot I'll get."

The renegade's lips curved in hate. "Yuh don't think yuh kin run a bluff on me like that! Why, dang yuh, I ain't any more scairt to die than you are! Yuh think I'd be fool enough to hand over my guns even if yuh knowed the way out? And let yuh drill me the minute yuh got them guns in yore paws!"

"Nope. I'm givin' you my word I'll get yuh out of this hell-hole so you won't die of thirst if you hand over yore guns. We both go out of here on an equal footing, or we both die here together. Take yore choice."

"And then the minute we'd git out yo'd cut down on me if yuh had the guns—"

"Wrong again. I'd give you good clearance and one of the guns. There's no secret I intend to turn you over as a prisoner, to be hanged for murder, Jerome, or else to kill you direct. But I've never cut down on a man that didn't have a gun or a man that had his back turned to me."

The eyes of the outlaw glistened. "You know danged well I'd kill yuh in a fair fight, Farrar. That's why I ain't trustin' yuh with the guns. Nix, not Tricks Jerome!"

"Throw 'em both away, across that high bank into the other wash."

"Watch me. Yo're a bigger man; yo'd pile onto me an' lick the tar out uh me!"

"Nope. I'm givin' my word we'll both go out of here alive, or we both stay here and rot. It's yore play."

For a moment the outlaw's crooked brows drew down in thought. Suddenly he showed his teeth in a grin. "Yo'd git me out uh yere in a hurry if yuh knowed all I didn't tell yuh, Farrar! Come to think of it, I'll make yuh a propersition. Yuh know I won't shoot yuh down jest yet—or I'd done it afore we got into yere. So I'm keepin' one gun. An' I know yuh won't dast cut down on me after yuh hear what I know. Yere's the other gun." He walked over and handed the weapon to the buckaroo. "Now git yore jerkline a-goin' an' I'll tell yuh the lay that'll hold off yore smoke!"

Zack Farrar saw that the gun presented by the renegade was fully loaded. He holstered the weapon. So confident was the outlaw in the efficacy of his story that the cowboy was curious. The buckaroo cracked the blacksnake whip and yelled at the horses.

He did not use the jerkline to guide the leaders, but let it idle in his hand. Tricks Jerome had not mounted the wagon seat this time, but took the off wheel-horse, opposite his sworn foe.

"How'd yuh like to know the name uh the hombre that's the man higher up in this whole play?" queried the renegade.

"Stick to facts," warned the cowboy, as the horses proceeded in the winding wash.

"Hell, the facts is good enough," grunted Jerome. "Course, you figger it's me. It ain't. The hombre higher up is that dude feenancier, Harley Day. He's the hombre that's been hirin' us waddies to raise Cain generally, deestroy the supply trains an' all. Course we done some robbin' on our own—bullion. But this gent Day was shore agreed to that, becose it worked in with his layout.

"He's aimin' to buy the colonel out. Colonel didn't want to sell. So this feenancier gits the notion in his head to starve out the camp, bust the labor problem wide open an' terrorize the bullion shipments generally. Hell, he figgers to buy the Colonel out at his own price if this thing keeps up any longer. Sheriff is plumb tied up with that gent, too, likin' a little mazuma. Git the drift?"

Much as Zack Farrar had mistrusted what the road agent would tell him, this story ran too true to the known facts to be doubted. It explained why Harley P. Day had had the fake posters printed putting a price on the head of the Thunderbolt.

"Course, that ain't no hair off'n yore hide," resumed the outlaw. "Yere's where you come in, though. Miz Jessie is sweet on that gent Day. She plumb give it out she was married to him—to kinda git rid uh certain gents that was makin' theirselves a nuisance around her—you know who I mean—"

"Careful what you say," warned the Thunderbolt, his fists clenching in anger that renegades like Jerome should have learned about his bitter experience with the ranch girl.

"Shore, I sabe," went on Jerome. "Well, accordin' to some uh Cougar Jackaree's bunch, which has had some hands workin' under cover at the Triple V, this gent Day has been pesterin' Miz Jessie somethin' fierce to marry her. Well, we all figgered to cash in on the same."

He paused a minute to demand why Zack Farrar was allowing the horses to take their own heads out of the Corkscrew. The line had dropped from the hand of the driver, who was paying absolutely no attention to the "jerk and pull" necessary to guide the team. The cowboy told him to go on with his tale.

"We figgered to cash in. Seems like this hombre Day drifted into Golden a month ago with a satchel holdin' one hundred thousand dollars in currency. Figgered to buy out the Ingot with a spot cash down payment that the colonel couldn't reefuse. Well, we all don't mind statin' we had our eye on that coin."

"Yuh don't say!" commented Farrar, sarcastically.

"Yeppy, we did. An' we got our lamps glued onto it yit. Now yere's the lay. Some uh Cougar's boys has toted off the lady an' penned her up in a certain place. Cougar lights out afore midnight to bring this hombre Day to her to do the rescue act—pervidin' uh course he hands over that stated coin. Course he'll do it, bein' crazy to marry her anyhow. If he don't, Cougar aims to kill her in front of him."

The jerkline buckaroo was silent a long moment. Putting together all the developments of the last few days, he realized Jerome could not be inventing the story out of the whole cloth. It dovetailed in with other facts. The cowboy's jaw locked in determination to have a hand in this proceeding.

"What's all this got to do with me?" he asked, as though little interested.

"Oh, nothin', I reckon. Oney I figgered yuh might be honin' to git over to the lady's hidin' place yoreself an' do that rescue act, bein' yuh asked her to marry yuh down to the Triple V t'other day!"

No further word was spoken by either for an hour. In and out among the Corkscrew's winding washes the freighter team traveled. At no time did the jerkline buckaroo pull the long thong of leather that reached to the leader. He let the animals choose their own way, gambling on their natural instinct to lead them out of this blistering waste to water.

Suddenly before them appeared the inclined break in the rim of the sink through which they had entered. The Thunderbolt and his sinister companion soon found themselves on the open desert, with the horses leading them toward the remnant of the flood waters in Rabbit River.

"Where's yore gang taken the girl?" demanded Farrar now, grimly.

Tricks Jerome laughed. "I was waitin' for yuh to ask that question. Now I reckon yuh know who holds ace cyard!"

CHAPTER XIX

A Pair Afoot

"EV'RY hombre has his price," went on the outlaw. "With some it's coin, others it's polertics. If it ain't them two it's somethin' else—women fer instance."

"I'm askin' you where they took her," said the Thunderbolt, evenly.

"Course yuh are." Again the ugly laugh. "But I'm takin' my own sweet time about tellin', yuh notice!"

"You want to risk the draw here and now, Jerome?"

"Might. Still, I dunno. Seems to me like I'm holdin' the ace without no draw. If you an' me fights it out yere an' now—an' say you would win, which is a lie—why then how'd you find out where they got that filly?"

"I'll find out—if the whole story ain't a lie," said the jerkline guard.

"Think I might be lyin', do yuh? Mebbe so. Oney I ain't! That hundred thousand proves it. We aim to shake down that dude promoter fer that amount.

The renegade showed his broken teeth. "Yuh don't need to be watchin' me so danged clost. I don't aim to draw on yuh. To prove the same, I'll state my idee is to lead yuh on plumb amongst the gang. Course yo'll go. Yo'll go becose that filly is there. So to ease yore mind, I'll promise yuh to show yuh where the lady is. She's over to Red Rock tradin' post."

The deputy from Utah considered the pretended revelation in all its aspects. It was a new sensation to take Tricks Jerome at his word. And yet Farrar found himself believing the renegade had spoken the truth. If the girl were actually a captive and Harley P. Day were to be double-crossed by his own associates in this manner, Jerome would have everything to gain by telling the story now. Red Rock trading post would be the scene of an outlaw rendezvous; hence the Utah killer would believe he was leading Farrar into certain death by taking him there. The Thunderbolt found himself using the jerkline to guide the team toward the desert dive.

"It won't do yuh a danged bit uh good to keep yore eyes on me thataway," grunted Jerome. "There ain't goin' to be no gunplay. I ain't honin' to swap lead with yuh long as yo're travelin' toward the post, to stick yore nose into shore enough trouble. Same time, yo're not goin' to go smokin' fer me, becose yuh ain't shore I'm tellin' the truth an' in case the lady ain't at the post yo'll figger to mebbe git the drap on me then an' make me tell the real place where she's held. So I reckon we're even."

This hint of the renegade that he might be lying about the presence of Jessie Verdin at Red Rock trading post convinced Farrar more than ever that she was there. Jerome was obviously trying to raise a doubt, in the hope of leading the Thunderbolt on.

The situation was a strange one, with two sworn enemies riding side by side on the wheel-horses, each with a loaded gun in his holster, each watching the other and neither making a hostile move.

The empty wagon traveled briskly through the sand and mesquite. The situation between Farrar and the killer could not last. The Thunderbolt considered his pledge to get the outlaw from the Corkscrew fulfilled, thus relieving him of further obligation. At the same time he hesitated about a showdown with guns now. Tricks Jerome knew too much to be disposed of so soon.

"Nossir," insisted the renegade, with a grin, "there ain't goin' to be no shootin' between me an' you long as I hold the key to Miz Jessie. Now, what we all figger is this: That hombre Day might balk—might say she wasn't wuth the money. It ain't likely, uh course, but then yuh cain't tell. In that case, why, with Cougar holdin' the filly, he might git a notion to see how much her dad would pay—an' her rich uncle, the colonel. You knowin' this, won't dast cut down on me that knows where to find her. And uh course I wouldn't try to kill you, Farrar, knowin' yo'll stick yore nose into a hornet's nest—"

He jerked the word off quickly and swiped for his forty-five.

He had laid the groundwork to take the Thunderbolt by surprise, and he tried to kill him now while Farrar was convinced his foe was peaceably inclined.

But if the cowboy deputy was apparently preoccupied with his thoughts, puzzling over a way to handle Tricks Jerome when the trading post was reached, he was far from asleep. The swiftness with which he nailed the other's draw before it was completed revealed that he had not removed his eyes from the road agent. Farrar's gun was snug against his hip in the saddle, slanted outward. Only the fact that Tricks Jerome's right hand was on the far side of the Thunderbolt prevented a double draw and a shooting. The outlaw's gun never left its holster.

"I was jest seein' if yuh was techy."

"You found out."

"Course, me bein' on the off hoss, right wing away from yuh, it wasn't no even play," grunted Jerome. "I'd been a fool to figger on gettin' yuh thataway."

This was true and Zack Farrar had marveled that the renegade should make such an attempt. It showed he had supreme confidence in his quickness.

The fact was the Utah deputy had decided he must disarm the killer and force him to his will in reaching the girl. He had purposely appeared careless and off guard. Now he broke the news:

"You're my prisoner, Jerome. Stick up the paws!" His gun had not been lowered, and it forced obedience. The Thunderbolt halted the team, dismounted and quickly took possession of the other's weapon.

"Afeared to fight me on the level?" sneered the renegade.

"You'll see, when the time comes to cash chips."

The freighter outfit proceeded. The outlaw became sullenly silent and Farrar was not desirous of conversation with him. The Thunderbolt felt better. If the band at Red Rock trading post sighted the team he would have a high card to play.

Then minutes later a man rose from a clump of mesquite by the trailside and waved his arms. He was Tug Blucher, on foot in the waste after his flight from Rabbit River. Delighted, the cowboy handed him the jerkline and with Jerome took a place in the wagon. The trading post was less than three miles distant, behind the reddish buttes.

After another mile Farrar called for a halt. "This heller and I will hoof it to the post, Tug. Drive the team back, will you, to the draw that leads into the Corkscrew? Pick up the provisions we dumped there, and the trailer. Horses need water; you can cut over to a water hole on the river not far out of the way. Take yore time—aim to hit Golden by evening. You can find the place where we unloaded by backtrailin' in these tracks in the sand."

He turned to his captive. "Now for yore hangout. Shake a leg!"

The pair started off through the mesquite.

The Thunderbolt made no effort to keep out of view of any watchful eyes at the desert dive. As outlaw and officer neared their destination Farrar gave orders:

"Put this gun back in yore holster." He shook out the shells, handed it over. Then he drew forth his own weapon and thrust it behind his pants belt, out of view under his leather vest. "Now I'm yore prisoner—understand? You've got the only gun. You're takin' me into the post. You're takin' me into the room where Miss Jessie is bein' held. No matter how many's there, you're takin' the girl, *and me,* and startin' for Golden alone with us. Understand?"

The outlaw's hawk eyes narrowed as he assented.

"And the first squawk you let out, tryin' to wise up yore gang that I'm the boss in this deal, you're a dead man. Do you get that?"

The renegade understood perfectly.

Fifteen minutes later the two desert travelers entered Red Rock trading post.

CHAPTER XX

The Shakedown

"DANG my eye, if it ain't Tricksy bringin' in the Thunderbolt!" Bert DeWees stomped over the barroom floor, spur chains rattling, a gleam of exultation in his muddy eyes.

"Where's the bunch?" grunted the outlaw chief, his gaze shifting about the room. Except for the crook-nosed lieutenant of Jerome, whose hand was incapacitated for gun work, due to a missing thumb, the place was absolutely deserted.

"Lit out for Golden."

"Where's the Verdin kid?"

"They took her along, too." DeWees chuckled. "Ruther, I'd say a gent by the name uh Day took her along. But he didn't git very far." The muddy eyes went to Zack Farrar. "How come yuh to ketch him, Tricks, and what'n sin is on yore mind—goin' to use him alive? One uh yore old tricks, I reckon!"

"Takin' him to Golden." Jerome made a move to be off. But the prisoner did not stir, though he made no hostile move as yet. He desired information.

"That scoundrel Day left here with Miss Jessie, did he?" he asked, enacting the rôle of an outraged suitor.

DeWees laughed heartily. "It don't make a danged bit uh difference to you, what he done, I reckon! Tricks, yuh ought to been here. You and yore pris'ner both. Cougar shore did shake that hombre down, like you ordered. And danged if that dude didn't shake down the filly, too, right in front uh the whole gang. He says, says he: 'I don't intend to pay over a hundred thousand dollars for a girl that doesn't think me good enough for her. If you'd rather stay here with these badmen and marry Cougar Jackaree, well and good!'

"It was shore a screech, that show was," went on DeWees. "That filly give him the dog eye and read the riot act. If it wasn't for Cougar steppin' in, to make the play good, I reckon she wouldn't 'a' took the dude over!"

"What did Cougar do?" snapped Farrar, forgetting for the instant his rôle as prisoner.

"Th' hell yuh say!" growled the renegade. "Where do you horn in on this little deal? If Tricks didn't have yuh in tow I'd fill yuh full uh lead for the way yuh shot off my thumb, Farrar. But yo'll git yores, I reckon! Say, Tricks, it was shore a screech. Cougar grabbin' her around the waist and hollerin' to the boys to likker her up. Cougar pretendin' he was goin' to put her back into that end room for keeps. And that dude standin' there with the satchel like he had any say if he'd pay over the money! We jest left him argy her into sayin' she'd marry him for a little genuwine entertainment.

"There never was a melodramer could equal it, except she didn't tear no hair, but jest stood there a-starin'. But the dude got her—or figgered he did, till he got goin' a ways. Then uh course the boys lit out an' grabbed 'em both." DeWees grinned knowingly.

"Where are they now?" demanded Farrar.

"Go'wan! Tricks, yuh want me to give this heller a earful?"

A steady, meaningful look from the Thunderbolt brought an affirmative nod from Jerome.

"It won't do no harm, I reckon, seein' yore last cyard has been played, Farrar! If it'll do yuh any good to know it, we all figgered if it was that easy to shake down this dude, it would be jest about as easy to shake down her uncle and her dad on top of it. So the boys grabbed her and the dude both, holdin' the dude so he wouldn't squeal what he knows. The bunch has high-tailed it into town to see what the colonel will pay. She's ridin' with the posse."

He chuckled again. "That posse will show their hand pronto, I reckon, and make the colonel dig down in his sock for every speck of coin he has. Then we aim to clean the whole danged town, for luck. Tricks, do them plans conflict with what yo're schemin' to do with this jerkline buckaroo before yuh drill him?"

For answer Bert DeWees received the shock of his life. He saw the ugly bore of a forty-five within two feet of his eyes. Since the prisoner held the gun the effect was startling.

"Tie this hombre up!" snapped Farrar, gesturing to Jerome.

It was done, and the Thunderbolt watched to see that the rope was properly knotted. He then bade Tricks go with him to the horse corrals. Within a few minutes the Utah deputy and the killer were riding at a gallop toward Golden.

The distance was sixteen miles, the route part way through the storm-washed arroyo, now almost dry but blocked in spots by boulders and débris, then over High Mesa and into the rough, rocky country of the mining region—a good two hours at the best gait possible. The fear of Zack Farrar was that he would not reach the gold camp in time. Certainly the outlaw band would have a good margin of time to carry out their program of extortion and plunder.

An hour passed with not a word from either of the strange, mismated companions. High mesa was reached and the gallop, often interrupted, was resumed. At last the sharp, jagged trail into the Minerals, steep, winding and narrow, forced the horses into a jog.

"Reckon yuh know yo're nosin' into a hornet's nest," chuckled Jerome.

"A snake's nest."

"Aim to turn me over to the sheriff?"

"Not that easy. *Not that sheriff.*"

The outlaw grinned. "Bill Bishop is shore one uh us. An' he's got the whole danged camp fixed to drill yuh on sight, Farrar."

"Yeah?"

"I bet yuh. Besides, them notices has done their work if I know anything!"

Farrar laughed. "By the time I get there, the whole danged camp will be prayin' for the Thunderbolt, like enough."

"Think so? Nix, they won't. Cougar ain't no fool. When he turns that posse over into a lootin' experdition he'll tell 'em how he's actin' under orders uh the Thunderbolt!"

"Wouldn't be surprised. We'll see." In fact, the Utah deputy had considered this likelihood. He knew how the whole countryside had been poisoned against him since the reward notices had been put up. It would be the natural thing for Cougar Jackaree, head of the renegades in Jerome's absence, to drag in the name of the Thunderbolt as his chief.

"Reckon yuh figger to use me some way—holdin' yore gun at my head?" probed Tricks.

"Might."

"Aim to assassernate me instead uh give me a honest trial by joory?"

"You'd deserve it."

Jerome laughed huskily. "Naw, yuh wouldn't do no sech cold-blooded murder as that, Farrar. I know yuh too well. Yuh've got a conscience. I reckon yo'd be scairt to give me a even break, though."

"Scared?" Farrar looked surprised.

"Uh-huh. 'Specially if you'd hand me a pair uh guns. There ain't my equal with a pair. Yuh know that. One's enough, though. You bein' called the Thunderbolt up in Yalla Basin don't say yo're better'n old Tricks—folks all knows that. Take Bill Teasdale—"

"You shot him in the back."

"Becose he was scairt uh me in front."

"That's a lie. You'll pay for murderin' Bill, Jerome."

"You cain't make me pay—with guns—even."

"Here?"

"Here an' now!" challenged the killer, eagerly.

He was too eager. The Thunderbolt reflected a moment. Nothing would have pleased him better than to settle the score as proposed. But there were other things to be considered, chief of them the fate of a brown-eyed girl. "I might need you alive awhile," decided Farrar. He drew rein suddenly, as a rider took the rise in front of him, within a half mile of Golden.

"A parson!" ejaculated the outlaw. "Where'n blazes did he come from?"

The wide, flop-brimmed black hat, the white collar and long black coat marked him. His light eyes were wide with excitement. Waving a soft white hand he came to an abrupt halt.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen! Turn back if you value your lives!" he implored. "Golden is in the throes of a state of terror! Ruffians! Robbers! They have been in possession of the village for three hours—have robbed the Ingot mill and looted what strongboxes they could open. Worse still, they are at this moment attempting to extort the last coin from the populace by a most horrible procedure—"

"Make it snappy!" shot out Farrar.

"That is the explanation of my flight, gentlemen! They have placed the daughter of a nearby ranchman upon a rostrum—a most beautiful young woman, one who is known and loved and respected throughout the county, one who—"

"Quick!" The Thunderbolt, tense in the saddle, snapped the word.

"They are bartering away her soul! The bandit leader not only is trying to sell her back to her loved ones and the loyal citizens of the camp, but he actually is holding over their heads the threat of matrimony—marriage with himself—unless the last small coin is produced by every man in hearing. They dragged me from my study and took me there to perform the ceremony with this wretch. I implored them to allow me to return to obtain the marriage service ritual. I managed to flee, thinking to spare her the stigma of authenticity—"

"Jerome, hand me that other gun," broke in the Thunderbolt. He reached for the empty weapon, loaded it, and thrust it into his open holster. While the parson marveled, he dismounted quickly, took the saddle rope from the horse he had obtained at the trading post, and tied Tricks Jerome hand and foot behind a clump of scrub cedar. He rose from his task in time to see three horsemen jump the rise from the direction of town. Hoofs clattered on the rocky hillside and above their uneven tattoo Farrar heard the yell of one of them:

"There he is! Grab that parson, boys, an' drag him back! Goshalmighty! There's the Thunderbolt! Shoot him!"

The roar of angry guns reverberated throughout the hills.

CHAPTER XXI

A TOWN AT BAY

THE straight, steep street of Golden was thronged at its middle, halfway from the gallows-frame of the mines to the general store below. Grim, haggard men, a handful of fear-stricken women and youngsters were herded in a mass in front of the false-fronted town hall, held in subjection by the guns of a score of outlaws who held the center of the stage. Horses, in charge of a guard, stood immediately behind the terrorists, four of them weighted down with twenty-five thousand dollars in bullion taken from the freighter in Rabbit River, the amalgam skimmed from the plates of the Ingot mill, coin and currency gathered in a two-hour sacking of the town.

On a platform that had served as a rostrum for the reading of the Declaration of Independence on the Fourth of July, a rough pine board structure that negligence had left standing after its usefulness had passed, stood Cougar Jackaree, his disease-pitted features scarlet with the heat of the late afternoon. Just under him, on the open step, clung a slender, white-faced girl, guarded beneath and at either side by a man. Cougar's deep voice boomed out over the crowd:

"Anybudy else?"

"I'll dig up mebbe twenty-thirty dollars. But it's over in the shack."

"'At's all right. Louie, you go with that hombre an' be shore yuh keep yore gun on him. Who else?"

A woman thought she could find a dollar in change.

"Go fetch it in a hurry, ma'm!" Cougar's mottled features brightened. "She looks like you all might ransom the gel arter all," he confided, "if this keeps up. But we got to have the coin. As shore as I'm standin' yere, I'm totin' her off if yuh don't kick through with the last dime. Pennies not countin'!"

He squirted a charge of tobacco juice at a yapping mongrel dog. "Who else has some coin that's offered? No more chicken feed like the lady jest chipped in! Real coin is what the Thunderbolt is demandin'! Some uh you hombres kin dig up a thousand if yo're in the notion. Who else? Another thousand an' we turn her loose an' hit fer Utah!"

Silence greeted the appeal. The outlaw frowned. "If yuh don't kick in, recollect what I told yuh! We're draggin' that sneakin' parson back yere pronto to perform the ceremony, an' if that don't look natural we'll take her off with the gang without no parson! An' recollect further, citerzens, that we have guns in our paws an' might let loose any minute!"

"You'll free her for a thousand?" demanded Colonel Sam Eaton, coldly.

"Yeah."

"I haven't got another dollar of my own, but I'll dig up the thousand somewhere. How long can I have?"

"Fifteen minutes. Butch, go with the colonel an' watch him like a hawk!"

He made a wry face. "Course, I hate to do a dirty trick like this, gents an' ladies. It's orders. Thunderbolt Zack Farrar is shore a hard boss for us boys! But he'd kill us shore-pop if we didn't git the coin. We got to raise the quotow or he squeals on us an' we go to the hoosegow! Yeah, he—" Cougar cut off abruptly. "Hello, there comes the boys with that air backslidin' parson!"

Around the corner of the bowling alley appeared four men, among them the individual in the black hat and coat and the white collar. The three renegades advanced with the parson in their van. Six-shooters jogged up and down in their swinging holsters.

"Miko, yuh done yoreself proud," greeted Cougar, addressing one of the trio. "Parson, you jest set down on the step a minute till we see if the colonel digs up that next thousand."

For fifteen minutes Cougar Jackaree regaled the crowd with coarse humor, attributing to Zack Farrar a weird thirst for deviltry that even Tricks Jerome would not have conceived. Then suddenly he yelled for the colonel.

After a long wait the mine owner appeared. His eyes glinted as he admitted he could not "dig up" the thousand anywhere.

"Suits me," chuckled Jackaree. "Parson, I reckon we might as well git it over with. Come a-runnin' an' tie us up forever till death do us part. Whoops! Did anybody say he had any coin hid out that he's offerin'?"

The citizens of Golden had been bled dry.

"Shake a hoof, parson!"

The man in the garb of a mining camp minister climbed the steps, asking the pardon of the girl in his way. She did not rise at Jackaree's injunction. He ordered her "toted" up. She was hustled to the Fourth of July rostrum.

"I'm takin' this yere lady fer my bride," sang out the renegade. "Is there any man yere would put the bonds asunder? Let him say his speech now or forever hold his peace. Parson, I'm askin' yuh to hitch us accordin' to Holy Writ—"

"One minute, Jackaree!" A youth in the crowd stepped forth. His features were black-brown like a Yaqui's, though they were of the white man's mold. "Ten citizens of Golden, men present in this crowd, have sworn to shoot you, Jackaree, if this is done. You've taken our guns, but we'll trail you down if it takes a lifetime!"

"Boys," shot out the renegade, huskily, "venterlate that hombre that jest spoke!"

"If you do," said the parson quickly, "I'll never perform this service!"

Cougar Jackaree whirled on the man of the cloth. "Holy Moses!" he ejaculated. "Where'd yuh pick up this preacher man, Miko? He ain't the same one!"

The outlaw addressed emitted a grunt. "Naw, we picked him up comin' intuh town."

"He'll do, I reckon. Well, we won't shoot that trouble-makin' hombre this time, parson. Say yore piece, Jessie; give me yore paw!" He reached for it.

Suddenly the muscles of his face froze into a hideous mask of surprise and rage. His tongue stuck to his mouth as he tried to cry a warning. He galvanized into action with flashing right hand, snatching forth his Colt.

He died with a bullet through the heart. It was a bullet from the Thunderbolt, and now the "parson" was standing with a pair of guns, one of them smoking, both muzzles upon the outlaws around the rostrum at his feet.

"Paws up—every one!" cracked the voice of Farrar. The hands reached for their weapons instead of skyward. Two renegades collected on their chips—with their boots on. The guns of the Thunderbolt, both smoking now, swept the motley throng beneath him and he found every hand held high.

He gestured to the youth of the dusky countenance, whom he knew to be without fear. "Collect the artillery, amigo! We'll finish this job in a hurry."

Someone uttered a harsh whisper. "Look behind you—quick!"

The Thunderbolt whirled. Approaching down the street, with catlike tread, was Tricks Jerome.

He was at too great a distance for effective gun work yet. With a show of bravado he swung his weapons into the holsters. He came on.

The deputy marshal from Utah was standing in a sidewise position, one from which he could not meet the killer to advantage, nor could he continue to tame the others of the band at that angle. Quickly he tossed one of his guns to the feet of the dusky youth. "Hold 'em," he said, "while I greet an old acquaintance."

He moved slowly down the steps into the street, his whole attention now on Tricks Jerome. He wondered how the outlaw chieftain had freed himself from the rope.

He visioned the scene where he had left Jerome, the battle with the three renegades who pursued the parson. Two of these had fallen at his hand. Two more arrived over the hill as the shots rang out. Farrar had made the remaining three obey his commands. The parson had willingly given the Thunderbolt his clothes.

Now, as the jerkline buckaroo watched the foe advance, he heard an excitable voice:

"Gentlemen, gentlemen! I have made a frightful mistake! I have played into the hands of—of an outlaw! That man in my apparel is the Thunderbolt!"

Farrar did not turn, for Jerome was within range to try the kill. The Utah deputy understood what had happened on the hillside—Tricks Jerome had talked the preacher into the belief that he was a citizen or officer, perhaps from Soledad, and that the parson had aided the notorious outlaw chief.

A tense second passed, during which the jerkline buckaroo expected almost anything, a howl from an infuriated crowd, attack from the youth to whom he had given one of his guns.

In the midst of this moment of uncertainty, Tricks Jerome's hand moved almost imperceptibly toward his holsters. So slow was the motion that only a gradual change of finger position revealed it. The outlaw's digits were curved inward, like the talons of a bird of prey.

"When you touch 'em, you die," warned the buckaroo.

"Th' same to you, Farrar!" The hawk eyes of the killer were still as deep waters and as coldly penetrating.

Then he drew both guns.

Swift as the eye had the drawing motion been.

A blur was at the right hip of Farrar, no more. There were three reports. Two of them sent their lead high because the other one had been a trace the quicker, jarring the killer off his feet at the instant he fired.

The Thunderbolt turned to face the crowd. He found no hostile eye among the citizens of Golden for the reason that Jimmy Orr, deputy from Soledad, had already revealed the truth to the colonel and his fellow townsmen. Tricks Jerome had lied when he had said Deputy Orr was a victim of the hold-ups.

"I plastered my mug black as I could make it, so's these coyotes wouldn't reckernize me," explained Jimmy, referring to his Yaqui color, after the remaining renegades had been rounded up. Among them was Bill Bishop, sheriff-robber.

The Thunderbolt went to Jessie Verdin, helped her to the saddle and rode home with her. He asked her what had become of Harley P. Day. The promoter had skipped the country.

She was able to laugh at things now. "When he paid over that hundred thousand," she said, "he really gave them only a few hundred, wrapping the rolls of currency around wads of paper, with bills on the outside of each bundle. I had to promise to marry him as the lesser of two evils, but since the price was freedom for a hundred thousand, I considered myself released! You know, I wanted to have you, don't you?"

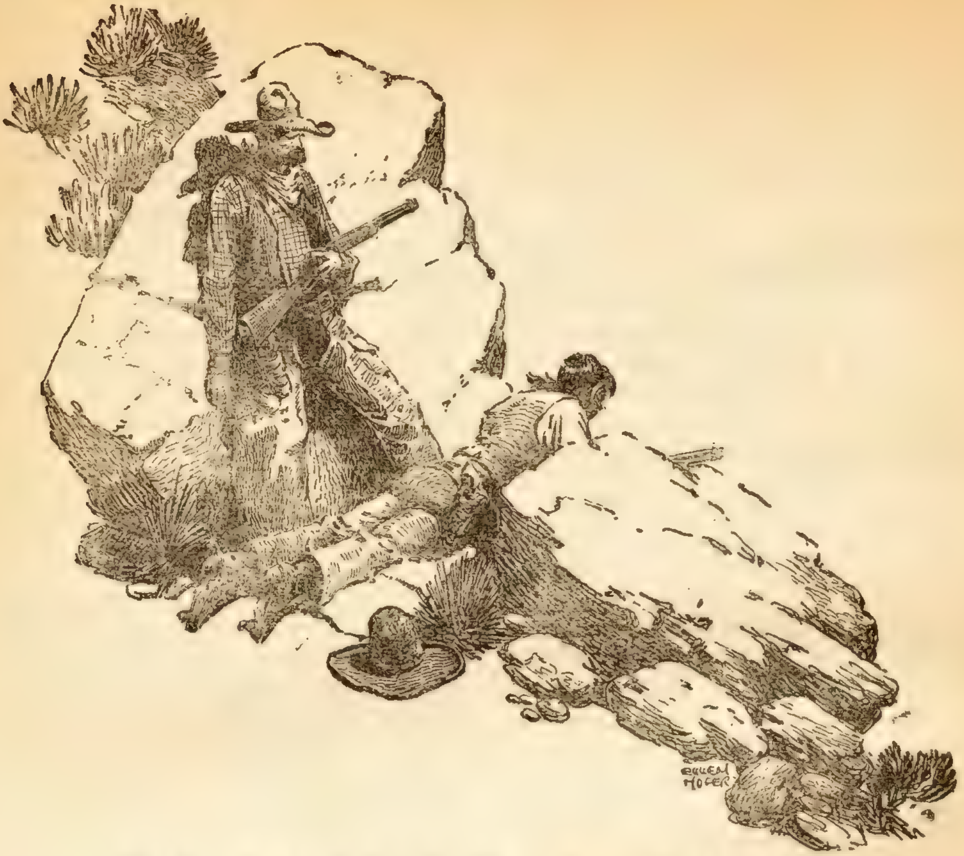
FOXY DOG TRAPS FOX BY MAKING IT DIZZY

FOUR Connecticut boy hunters, Clarence and Sterling Mott and Lawrence and Lemuel Wadsworth, boast a shepherd dog that catches foxes by making them dizzy.

While out skunk hunting, Teddy, the dog, treed a fox. Round and round the tree Teddy ran with the fox watching until finally it slipped, clutched, slipped again and was down, reeling around the ground. Teddy had proven himself an adept hunter.

RADIO RECEIVERS USE LITTLE ENERGY

EXPLAINING radio receiving sets, Leroy J. Williams, patent attorney and expert of the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company, recently asserted that the energy used by a fly crawling up a wall one inch would be more than the energy used by a radio set in four years running twenty-four hours a day. He said that the same energy would be more than a receiving set in Schenectady, N. Y., would use in twenty-five years picking up San Diego.



THE FRECKLE-FACED GUNMAN

By Howard E. Morgan

A steel-nerved young sheriff strides with blazing guns into the midst of an outlaw band.

JOE COOK, temporary sheriff of Lincoln County, was matching pennies with Stew Maynard, the town bum, on the shaded porch of Clancy's General Store, when the excitement started. There were three roaring reports, followed by the crash of glass, and a jagged hole appeared in the window of the sheriff's office directly across the street.

"Sho' now, somebody must have thought I was to home, an'—" Joe Cook's youthful face broke into a freckled grin. But the grin vanished abruptly as a crouching figure, smoking six-gun in hand, circled about the corner of the store. Young Cook caught a fleeting glimpse of a whiskered face, then there was a shouted cry of warning; the gunman scurried about the corner of the building and out of sight.

Briefly, Joe Cook's big hand fumbled at his belt where his gun ought to be. There was no gun there, he knew. He had removed his gunbelt less than ten minutes before, due to the heat, and it was now hanging on a peg on the wall of the sheriff's office. There was no one else in Clancy's store but badly frightened Mrs. Clancy—and Stew Maynard. In her excitement, Mrs. Clancy would not have known where to look for a gun even if there had been one handy; and, of course, Stew didn't possess a whole pair of shoes, let alone a shooting-iron.

"That there was Curly Lynch," Maynard advised, low voiced, "Mark Stanbury and his gang. . . ."

But mention of these two names, both much dreaded in Corbet City, evidently did not impress Joe Cook. Hesitating no more than a brace of seconds as he fumbled at his empty belt, the unimposing young law officer vaulted easily over the five-foot porch railing and disappeared about the far side of the store, running swiftly. Curly Lynch, warned by his companion—which latter person stood, a gun in each hand, in the swinging doors of the Blue Cow Saloon beside Clancy's store—backed slowly away toward his horse which impatiently tugged at the end of its rope, where it was tied to a cottonwood tree at the end of the wide alley, between Clancy's store and the Blue Cow Saloon.

So it was that, as Joe Cook circled swiftly around the store, he almost collided with the retreating gunman. Curly Lynch heard the pound of Joe Cook's adequate feet on the hard ground. With cat-like agility he pivoted right about, firing from the hip at Cook's indistinct figure.

His bullet crashed into the wall a scant few inches from the young law officer's head and, within the next instant, that redoubtable gunman, Curly Lynch, received the surprise of his life.

Instead of freezing in his tracks in response to that roaring command, Joe Cook dove headlong at the bandit's legs. At the last moment Lynch struck at Cook's weaving red head with his clubbed gun. The heavy gun barrel landed glancingly on the freckled youth's hatless cranium, but apparently the blow did not even daze him, for Curly Lynch felt his two legs seized in a resistless grip.

Almost immediately thereafter, he was lying flat on his back on the ground and struggling futilely for possession of his gun, with a steel-muscled young giant in whose hands he was as helpless as a child. The bandit's writhing struggles ceased abruptly as an upflung knee caught him solidly on the point of the chin.

Ten seconds later Joe Cook was on the way to the jail carrying Curly Lynch's limp body, like a sack of meal, over his shoulder.

As he came within range of the swinging doors of the Blue Cow Saloon, twin reports sounded in quick succession. One shot kicked up the dust at Joe Cook's feet. The other brushed the top of his curly red head. He swiftly swung his prisoner down, and, using the now feebly struggling bandit as a shield, continued on his way toward the jail, which joined the sheriff's office in the rear.

There were no more shots.

Reaching the sheriff's office, Joe Cook accomplished many things in an amazingly short space of time. He tossed his prisoner on the single bunk in the little jail, turned a bucket of lukewarm water over that dazed individual's person, snatched up his gunbelt and battered felt hat, and; in something less than a minute, was dashing recklessly across the street toward the Blue Cow Saloon.

He found a badly scared quartet of poker players there, and Mike Kresge, the squint-eyed bartender, blasphemously bathing a shattered arm. Mark Stanbury, who, accompanied only by his first lieutenant, Curly Lynch, had staged the impromptu hold-up, was gone. A swift-moving dust cloud, rapidly diminishing in the distance, advertised the bandit chief's hurried departure.

The consensus of opinion of the habitués of the Blue Cow Saloon appeared to be that this last depredation of Stanbury and his gang was—too much. During the past six months the bandit had been responsible for no less than a dozen hold-ups within a radius of fifty miles about Corbet City. There were three known killings for which he, personally, was accountable. Ten days since, he had shot down Sheriff John Priller on the street before Clancy's store.

He had thrice robbed the Wells Fargo Express office, the last time killing the express agent. He had twice held up the Queen Lou Mine messenger; and he had thoroughly and scientifically shot up Corbet City—several times. Withal, he had always before respected the Blue Cow as a place where even he might occasionally drop in for thirst-quenching purposes.

Scarcely a month went by that Stanbury and his men did not avail themselves of the hospitality offered by the Blue Cow. Those of Corbet City's citizenry who regularly utilized the Blue Cow as a place of recreation, had come to feel that the saloon was not only a congenial spot wherein a man might quench his thirst and engage in pleasant gossip, but that it was safe, in these times of stress, from Mark Stanbury's unpleasant attentions.

But, to-day, even this sacred shrine had been violated. Every man there had been stripped clean. Under Mike Kresge's protest, the bandit had even possessed himself of the contents of the cash drawer, amounting to some eight hundred dollars in small bills and silver. As Mike Kresge sulphurously repeated, this was too much.

To these sentiments Stanbury's other victims heartily concurred. It was evident, however, that none of them expected Joe Cook to do anything about it. In the first place, he was only a kid, and, in the second place,—well—he just didn't look the part. In fact, the loose-jointed, rawboned, freckle-faced youngster who had come from down South somewhere—to take the recently demised sheriff's place until Lincoln County could find a hardy individual willing to risk his life for the paltry hundred dollars a month offered by the county for his services—evidenced none of the qualifications necessary to combat the well organized gang of quick-shooting desperadoes, captained by that most feared gunman in the state of Arizona—Mark Stanbury.

He was, in the first place, too good natured. The little desert town of Corbet City could find no quality in Joe Cook commonly expected of a hunter of men. Despite his freckles and his everlasting grin, he was as inconspicuous in any gathering as could be imagined. He had, for instance, circulated in and about Corbet City for two days, immediately after his arrival a month since, without being noticed even by Mike Kresge, whose business it was to know everybody.

Dressed in faded khaki clothes and riding a buckskin horse of curiously the same shade as his clothes, he had come and gone without attracting the slightest attention. If anyone did notice him, he would probably have placed him as a farmer's son from out Elson way, where various small growers of garden truck had recently settled, following completion of the new irrigation project sponsored by the government.

When he had finally introduced himself to Corbet City's officials, presenting a letter written by Sheriff John Priller before the latter's death, the aforementioned city officials found themselves at a loss. But Sheriff Priller had been well thought of; alive or dead, his judgment was still respected.

Even so, however, chances are that Corbet City would have brusquely declined Joe Cook's services had there been another man, of any sort, to take over the sheriff's job. There had been no such man in prospect, however. So it was that, for the past month, Joe Cook, temporary sheriff of Lincoln County, had lounged about Corbet City's dusty streets, his freckled face ever twisted into a friendly grin, talking with this one and that one, questioning here and there—always questioning.

Even to the most disinterested observers, it was apparent that Joe Cook chose his few intimates in queer places. There was for instance, Stew Maynard. Actually, Stew Maynard was not a drunkard, as his nickname implied. Of course, he was a lazy, shiftless old rascal, eking out a precarious existence by doing odd jobs for Tim Clancy. Joe Cook and Stew Maynard had become very good friends. Certainly a more curiously matched pair had never joined hands in the sacred bond of friendship.

Stew Maynard was Joe Cook's one sincere booster. Wherever men foregathered, there Stew Maynard might be heard extolling Joe Cook's superlative marksmanship, his unbelievable strength, and so forth. As usual, however, men paid little attention to the talkative old reprobate.

During Cook's tenure of office, which had extended over something less than a month, Mark Stanbury and his gang had remained consistently out of the limelight. But now, to-day, the bandit had turned up at his old tricks. In the Blue Cow Saloon, none was aware of Joe Cook's expeditious capture of Curly Lynch. Beyond casually noticing that Joe Cook had entered the saloon, no one paid him the slightest attention. Used to being ignored, the young officer lounged against a corner of the bar and listened to the heated conversation.

Without himself being obliged to ask a question, he learned the complete story of the hold-up.

Stanbury and Lynch had entered the saloon, guns in hand. They had each taken a couple of drinks and had then proceeded to rob the frightened men. Mike Kresge had protested and been shot in the arm. Peering out through the big front window, the bandit had mistaken a coat draped over the back of a chair in the sheriff's office across the street, for the slumping figure of Joe Cook. Curly Lynch had neatly perforated that cot with a shot from his six-gun. Stanbury, from his point of vantage at the front door of the saloon, had discovered the mistake and warned Lynch.

Just as Joe Cook, his information complete, was about to leave, Stew Maynard, a bloody welt over one temple, reeled in through the swinging doors.

"He's gone, Joe!" the old man gasped. "They got him! Three of Stanbury's men—"

Although, from these few disconnected words Joe Cook readily grasped the fact that Curly Lynch had been freed from jail by three of his friends, the young law officer's first concern seemed to be for Stew Maynard's welfare. He threw a long arm about the old man's thin shoulders and led him out into a back room. Here he carefully cared for the ugly wound which the old fellow had sustained while attempting, unarmed though he was, to prevent the jail delivery.

Curious for a look at the notorious Curly Lynch, Stew Maynard had circled about the close growing cottonwood thicket behind the jail. As he stood peering in through the barred window he had been attacked from the rear by three men. One of them had struck him over the head with a gun barrel. Although dazed, he had not been altogether unconscious, and, lying there, he had seen one of the men, armed with a crowbar, jimmy his way into the jail. As soon as he was able to investigate, the old fellow had hurried to the Blue Cow with his story.

Perhaps fifteen minutes later, Joe Cook left the saloon, his arm linked tightly in Stew Maynard's arm. To all outward appearances the young law officer was concerned only with the welfare of his queer friend; seemingly, he was not in the least concerned with his duty, which at the moment most certainly demanded action of some sort in connection with these newest offences of Stanbury and his gang.

It was not until something over an hour later that Joe Cook rode away from Stew Maynard's dilapidated little cabin on the edge of the town, bound, evidently, for the Doubleday Hills in the purple distance.

Although Joe Cook's last words had been commands to the effect that Stew Maynard should stay in bed for the next couple of days, the young law officer had scarcely disappeared from sight, when the old man was back in town, his face very white, his head circled with bloody bandages, begging for the loan of a horse.

"I gotta help him, I tell you. O' course, I ain't much good. But somebody's gotta help him. He's goin' it alone—that kid—goin' after Mark Stanbury and his bunch. He's a game rooster, chain lightning with a gun an' all that, but he don't stand a chance with that pack of wolves."

"If he's such a wizard as you say he is, Stew, he ought to be able to handle the whole crowd of 'em, single handed," a doubter sneered.

"Aw, you go to hell!" the old man sputtered, with a display of temper uncommon to him. "You make me sick. You all make me sick. Why don't you get together a posse and help the kid out? Give him a chance—but no, you won't do it. I know you. I know you all. You're yellow, that's what you be, the whole damn kit an' caboodle of you. If you'd joined in and given John Priller a hand, he'd be with us to-day. You can *all* talk, but when it comes to riskin' your precious necks, for the good of the community, you balk. I know you.

"Stew—Stew Maynard am I? And I ain't tetched a drop o' liquor since the law told me not to, which is more than any one o' you all can say. An' Stew Maynard's goin' to show you yellow-bellied snakes suthin'. I'm goin' to give that kid a hand, an', if somebody don't loan me a horse, I'll take one."

Much of the old man's bitter tirade was

not justified, but he *was* angry, and, as an angry man will, he enlarged upon his pet grievances to a point bordering upon indiscretion. Still, parts of Maynard's denouncement went home to some of the dozen or more men grouped upon the porch of the Blue Cow Saloon, at whom it had been directed. The old fellow secured the loan of a horse but failed to borrow a gun. He also failed to persuade any of the men to join him.

Several of them attempted to dissuade him from his evidently foolish undertaking; the old man staggered when he walked and it was apparent to all that he should really be in bed. But to all attempts at dissuasion, Stew Maynard turned a deaf ear. He was still very angry and his wiry old body, weakened as it was by the loss of much blood due to his wound, was erect, and there was a purposeful something or other in his attitude, which Corbet City found it hard to reconcile with the Stew Maynard they had known for so many years.

IT was dusk by the time Joe Cook had cleared the straggling outskirts of Corbet City. Looming blackly on the horizon, seemingly close at hand, were the Doubleday Hills. Joe Cook knew, however, that those hills were still many miles distant. He knew, too, that Stanbury and his men invariably cut straight across the desert toward the hills, so confident were they of the fleetness of their mounts. Once in the hills, and they were safe; no man, to date, had been able to ferret out their stronghold.

As is usual in the West, the night descended abruptly, blotting out the purple shadows and smothering the desert's gray surface in blackness. Rolling black wind clouds obscured the moon. The sky was jet. Even so, the naked sands reflected a hint of light, enough so that the lone horseman found little difficulty in holding to the rutted roadway, which roadway, used by mule teams plying between Corbet City and the Queen Lou Mine, stretched clear across the neck of desert to the foothills of Doubleday Mountain.

Pausing only at long intervals to make very certain that he was on the road, Joe Cook kept on all through the night. It was gray dawn when he turned off from the roadway to follow the evident tracks made by four horsemen on into a cottonwood thicket, skirting the base of the mountain.

Although the young law officer's horse showed evident signs of weariness, the youthful rider's pale blue eyes were as bright and alert as ever. He sat, slouched low in his saddle, but his keen eyes, peering alertly here and there from beneath down-tilted hat brim, missed no detail of the wild country just beyond the cottonwood grove, through which the bandits' trail led him.

Just as the sun was breaking through a feathery bank of gray clouds in the eastern sky, young Cook found himself at the entrance to a wooded draw, some distance back in the hills. For some time his horse had been restless, and, although his best efforts had discovered no sign of any living thing, Joe Cook respected the judgment of his horse to such an extent that before entering the draw—which well might form a trap—he came to a stop beneath the wide flung limbs of a sturdy beech tree, and, eyes and ears intently alert, watched and waited.

Rusty, the horse, knew its young master's business very well indeed. It was seldom that the intelligent beast displayed the slightest concern over the presence of bear or mountain lion; but a man, lurking in a thicket, would produce a nervous restlessness equivalent to that displayed by most horses when apprized by their delicate nostrils of the proximity of a wild beast or a snake. This fortunate peculiarity of his faithful horse, Joe Cook was fully acquainted with.

So it was that, although himself convinced that there was no human being the length and breadth of that trough-shaped gully before him, he dismounted, and, tethering Rusty beneath the big beech tree, crept on hands and knees up a short slope to the top of a knoblike hill.

Arriving at this point of vantage, he crouched behind a sandstone boulder and minutely inspected the rock-littered valley spread out below him. Twice, he thought he saw a man's stooped body, stealthily shifting position, on the opposite hillside. In the first case, concentrated inspection proved that his eyes had played him false. In the second place, the "man" turned out to be a half grown black bear. Assured, finally, that the rock-lined gully through which he must pass contained no human being, he came boldly to his feet and started back toward the spot where he had left his horse.

But just as he came erect, a rifle bullet ricocheted, screeching, off the gray boulder at his back. Immediately thereafter, the spiteful crack of the rifle sounded. A dozen spanking echoes followed the report. And, as Joe Cook dropped precipitately on hands and knees, another shot sounded, another and still another. All three bullets came uncomfortably close. He failed to definitely locate any of the marksmen. All shots had come from far up on the opposite wall of the valley. Lying there, flat on his stomach, Joe Cook grinned sheepishly.

"I sure got to hand it to you, Rusty, old boy," he muttered; "that's once more you saved my neck. If it hadn't been for you, I would have stuck my head right into the noose. They was sure enough waitin' for me. Within the first hundred yards they would have riddled me."

Even though he had succeeded in escaping their first fusillade, Joe Cook realized, all too well, that he was still in a mighty dangerous position. There was no shelter worthy of the name atop the little hill where he now lay. The only reason he had not been hit in that first bombardment was because of his clothes, the color of which so accurately matched the yellow sands; but the slightest movement on his part would serve to point him out to the watchers up there on the mountainside.

For several long minutes Joe Cook lay very still, one bronzed cheek hugging the cool sand. At irregular intervals, a rifle bullet sought him out; several of them came close, but no one of them found its mark.

The sun crept up through the straggly jackpine thicket across the valley, sending fingers of yellow light searching here and there athwart the rock-littered valley. As soon as the sun cleared the top of the jackpine thicket he would be out of luck. This, Joe Cook realized instantly. With the sun shining full upon him, those keen-eyed riflemen, up there, would be able to differentiate between him, and the yellow sand upon which he lay. To avoid being shot down without having lifted a hand in self-protection, it would be necessary that he do something, very, very soon.

So it was that, during a brief lull in the firing, he sprang to his feet and scurried for the nearest shelter, which happened to be a clump of thick growing bush, twenty yards down the slope.

No shots greeted him until he had covered well over half the distance to the shelter he sought. Then, a veritable hail of bullets spattered about him. There was a sharp pain along the side of his head as though a red hot iron had been drawn with quick fingers along his temple. Half blinded for the moment by the shock of the bullet as it creased his skull, he staggered and stumbled sidewise, like a drunken man. He kept his feet, however, until within a dozen yards of the brush clump; then, his knees grew weak. With a last mighty effort he threw himself, headlong, down the slope.

The daze left him, almost immediately, and it was not until he sought to lift the rifle that he discovered his right arm was useless. He stared wonderingly down at the blood trickling from his finger tips. Hasty inspection discovered an ugly wound just above the elbow. The shot had gone through and through the fleshy part of his arm and had apparently severed an artery. Already, his entire lower arm was drenched with blood.

The instant his eyes cleared, Joe Cook discovered two of his enemies, where they crouched half hidden behind jagged boulders up on the opposite hillside. He debated, briefly, whether first to attend to his wound or attempt to dispose of at least one of his enemies. He promptly decided on the latter. With unfamiliar fingers he switched the rifle to his left hand. Resting the long-barreled gun in the crotch of a stunted cedar scrub, he sighted carefully and fired. In response to the shot the first of the two bandits sprawled backward against the rocky wall, and lay very still. Joe Cook grunted his satisfaction. "Number one," he muttered.

The second bandit knelt, rifle in hand, peering out across the valley, evidently striving to locate his human game. Joe Cook grinned whitely as he realized that this second bandit was decidedly out of luck. Only by crossing an open space well over a hundred yards across, could he find adequate shelter. The long, low, moss-covered shoulder of rock, behind which the fellow crouched, at no spot shielded him from Joe Cook's view.

The distance to this second rifleman was too great for accurate shooting. Joe Cook was handicapped, too, by being obliged to use his left hand. His first shot, however, caused the bandit to duck. The second shot kicked up a tiny puff of stone dust from the gray boulder, not a foot from the crouching man's face. Without waiting for the third shot, the rifleman sprang to his feet and scurried like a frightened rabbit along the hillside.

Joe Cook aimed very, very carefully at that running figure. Just as he pressed the trigger, a red blur shot across his line of vision, blotting out the running man. So it was that the young law officer did not see when the bandit threw up his arms, stumbled, and fell headlong down the rocky slope.

With the back of a hand Joe Cook brushed the blood out of his eyes and shook his tousled head violently in an effort to clear away the dizziness. This simple motion did not accomplish the desired result. He was dizzy and sick. His body was clammy cold. The hand that again grasped the black rifle was wet with cold perspiration.

"Come on now, Joe, brace up," he muttered through clenched teeth. "That's only two of 'em. There's three more, anyhow. You—you—you gotta stay with it—"

With a superhuman effort the young law officer threw off the cloying faintness. He rolled over on a side and inched slowly up the slope, as several shots hissed through the brush uncomfortably close to the spot where he lay. Blood from the wound on his head persistently flooded down into his eyes. He attempted vainly to knot his handkerchief about his forehead; but, with only his left hand to work with, the attempt failed. He caught up a handful of the powdery sand by his side and plastered it upon the wound, hoping that this might serve to congeal the blood.

"Two of 'em, two of 'em, two of 'em," he muttered over and over again. "Got two of 'em. Three more. Three—three of 'em."

Shots were coming from the opposite side of the valley, now. Joe Cook lay on a side and squinted dizzily upward. At least half the time the yellow slope swam in a formless blur before him. Rifle ready, couched in the circle of his arm and shoulder, he watched and waited. And then, as his vision was for an instant clear, he caught the gleaming reflection of sun on a rifle barrel. But before he could bring his gun about to focus on the enemy, a spell of faintness obliterated the scene.

When his eyes again grew clear, the rifle barrel was gone, but, some distance along the rugged slope, the owner of the rifle was scurrying from boulder to boulder, his evident intention being to get into a position so that he could attack from the rear. With jaws set to resist the ever threatening faintness, Joe Cook followed the bandit's swift moving form over the rifle sights.

When he finally fired, the man stopped in his tracks, as though brought up short by collision with some immovable object. For an instant the stricken man stood very still, teetering gently back on his heels, then his legs crumpled, the rifle dropped clattering, and he fell.

"Number three," Joe Cook grunted, grimly. "Two more — two — two — two more—."

But even Joe Cook's sturdy optimism viewed with misgiving the probability of his being able to stay with the fight, unless things came to a head very quickly. His entire right side was drenched with blood; even the ground was red with it. His head wound no longer bothered him, the sand having served to clot the blood. The wound in his arm was not necessarily serious, but it did need immediate attention; already he had lost much blood. Soon, very soon now, he would go under, and, unless help arrived shortly thereafter, he would never wake up. Without doubt, the artery in his arm had been severed by the rifle ball.

With a very real effort the lad finally groped to his feet. For an instant he stood uncertainly, swaying this way and that. He moistened his dry lips, and his freckled face grimaced a white-lipped smile.

"Well, here I am, boys," he muttered huskily, "come on, be sports—fight it out."

Then, as though in response to his muttered invitation, the figure of a man appeared, jinnilike, from behind a brush clump little more than a hundred yards distant. At a glance, Joe Cook recognized Curly Lynch. The bandit held a rifle rigidly before him and his ugly face was twisted into a grin of triumph. The bandit's rifle, half raised, swung quickly upward until its black barrel unerringly indicated the young law officer's heart.

Frantically, Joe Cook sought to raise his rifle. The gun came up quickly in response to his spasmodic effort, but, even as his sweating fingers searched for the trigger, Joe Cook knew that the bandit would be able to *empty* his gun, before he himself could fire a shot.

An inarticulate cry of frustration squeezed out through the lad's white lips. Then, there was a flash of movement behind a clump of brush at the bandit's right. It was a man—a man with a club, upraised over his head . . . Stew Maynard!

Stew Maynard did not attempt to reach Lynch. When still some distance away, the old man hurled the club with all his strength. The heavy missile struck the bandit in the chest. The rifle exploded harmlessly in the air, and, within the next instant, Stew Maynard had thrown himself headlong upon the surprised bandit. Joe Cook, breathing hard, watched, wide eyed. With an amazing display of strength, Stew Maynard fought with silent desperation for possession of the bandit's rifle. It was immediately evident, however, that the old man was no match for his younger and stronger opponent. It was only a matter of time. . . .

Stumblingly, Joe Cook approached the combatants, rifle half raised. But it was impossible to shoot. The bodies of the two men were never still. To fire would mean taking a chance upon hitting Stew Maynard. Frantic lest the old man who had saved his life should be badly hurt, Joe Cook's weakened body uncovered an unsuspected reserve of strength. His step grew firm. Without conscious reason he threw aside the rifle and was about to reach for the six-gun in his belt. Then, with his eyes fixed on the struggling men, he glimpsed out of the corner of an eye a new arrival upon the scene. It was Mark Stanbury!

Evidently, the bandit chief was intent upon the same thing that most concerned Joe Cook—namely, the fight between Maynard and Lynch. He came running along the hillside, calling encouragingly to Lynch. He saw Joe Cook at almost exactly the same instant Joe Cook saw him. Stanbury stopped in his tracks. His right hand streaked toward the gun in his belt. At the same instant Joe Cook reached for his gun. The fact that Mark Stanbury was known and feared as the quickest man on the draw in Arizona, apparently did not concern Joe Cook. The young officer's attention was equally divided between the struggling men and Mark Stanbury, as his left hand reached for his gun. Even to an interested observer, Stanbury's movements were quicker than the eye could follow.

Quick as he was, however, Joe Cook was quicker. Three reports sounded, almost simultaneously. To a delicate instrument, capable of accurately measuring sound waves, however, it would have been evident that Joe Cook fired *twice* before that single shot left Mark Stanbury's gun. Even as the gun slid out into his hand, Joe Cook had seen Stew Maynard drop on his knees, and Curly Lynch, rifle upraised, poised above the old man's grizzled head. So it was that the freckle-faced gunman's first shot had sought out Curly Lynch. His second shot had been directed at Mark Stanbury.

And now, as the roaring echoes of three shots died away, it was discovered that Curly Lynch lay, flat on his back in the yellow sand, a blue hole the size of a hickory nut squarely between his eyes. Curly Lynch was most certainly dead. Mark Stanbury lay flat on his face in the sand. Joe Cook's second shot had struck the bandit chief squarely in the chest. Long before Stew Maynard got around to investigate the effect of this shot, Mark Stanbury was dead. Joe Cook had dropped on hands and knees as Stanbury had fired. He still crouched there as Stew Maynard came running.

" 'Tain't nothin', 'tain't nothin' at all, Stew," he protested, as the old man dropped on a knee and sought with his feeble strength to lift the young officer's sturdy body. "Just nicked me, that's all, in my right arm, which same ain't no good, nohow."

WHEN Stew Maynard, mounted on Joe Cook's fleet-footed horse, Rusty, started back for Corbet City next day for help, he was met at the edge of the hills by some twenty horsemen.

A lean-bodied, grizzle-haired stranger was in command. This important appearing person, Stew soon discovered, was none other than John Cook, the United States Marshal, known and feared by all evil doers the country over. Three stern-faced, capable young men were also strangers to Maynard. All three of these, it developed, were deputy Marshals. It also developed, a bit later, that Joe Cook was John Cook's son. It developed, too, that Joe Cook was an employee of Uncle Sam, and, like his father, a United States Marshal.

Stew Maynard's weary old eyes gleamed with an I-told-you-so expression when these facts became known to him; and he laughed as he peered about at Corbet City's citizens, who had been forced, regardless of their inclination, into service by the marshal, and who now listened with respectful attention as the old man told his story. He told it proudly and in a remarkably few words.

"He—he—Joe got 'em all," he boasted. "There's three dead ones—Mark Stanbury, Curly Lynch and one other—and there's two who will live—to swing. Joe, he's all right but he's awful weak."

Sometime later, when Joe Cook left Corbet City with his father, Stew Maynard, the only man in Corbet City who had not taken a drink since July 1, 1918, was left in young Cook's place as temporary sheriff.

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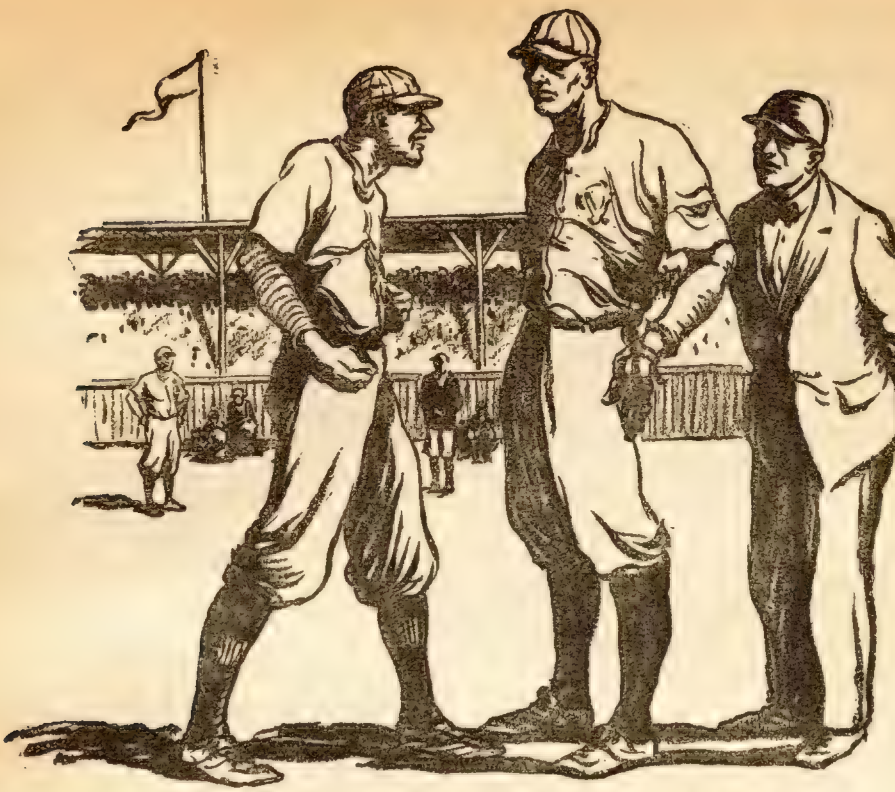

ROUND OATHS AND RUNS

By James W. Egan

It takes a tight mouth as well as tight fielding to win this ball game.

ANY man behind the iron mask who's guessed as many balls and strikes as I have is hep that a ball player can't change his nature no more than the muchly advertised leopard can dry-clean the dots offa the old overcoat. Ye athlete ain't normal unless he's crabbin' or cryin' about somethin'; and when he squawks his tones ain't apt to be soft and low or his phrases chaste and churchly. At indigoin' the ozone plenty tossers has got a truck driver or a traffic cop backed off the blue streak map.

Cuss words is as common around a ball yard as cold hot dogs. You can write that down on your score card. But it ain't often you hear of a game bein' won or lost accordin' to the actual number of round oaths employed. I know of it happenin' just once in all the long years since I fell outa a second-story window and took up umpirin'. I've called 'em in some prize hazel exhibitions, but this fracas sure had the squirrels squealin', and that's somethin'.

Bobby August, who manages the Blue Caps, breezed up to me one evenin' while I was at the hemp counter of the Hotel Chargemore, tryin' to dice a well done blonde outa some cordage.

"Hello, Mike!" he says. "Come here! I think I got somethin' I can throw your way."

"What—a pop bottle?" I wisecracks.

"No, a bouquet of asparagus," grins Bobby. "Lay off the airy apple sauce, Mike; I gotta job for an umps. You know Monday is an open date with the Blue Caps? I should say Monday was—for we've booked an exhibition. And what a exhibition! You're due to see a goofy game of baseball, Mike!"

"That won't be no novelty," I says.

"Is that so? Well, anyway, you ain't never been mixed up in a contest cuckoo as this'll be. As baseball it'll be a crime; but as a publicity stunt I figure it a wow.

So does Everett Exeter Ensign himself."

"Who," I demands, "is Everett Exeter Ensign?"

"Even a umpire shouldn't be so ignorant. The guy with all that monicker is a publicity director de luxe—a peerless press agent doin' business in our great metropolis. He had an idea the other day. Indeed, Everett Exeter Ensign's as fulla ideas as most restaurant cream pitchers are of skim milk. Moreover, he was recently engaged by the Clean Life Colony to help 'em raise funds for a new wing on their home. I suppose you don't know anythin' about the Clean Life Colony, either?"

"You're a swell supposer. Is the bathtub trust back of it?"

"The Clean Life Colony," Bobby answers severely, "is located up in the hills, some fifty miles outa Mammothville. It's what you might call a religious settlement, I guess. Members of the colony are people who are said to be tired of the sins and temptations of the wicked world. They wish to lead clean, prayerful lives all by themselves. That's accordin' to Ensign."

"Does he belong to the outfit?" I says. "How can he, bein' a press agent?"

"Of course he don't! The colonists know their potatoes. In makin' a drive for dough nowadays you gotta have a expert workin' the publicity racket. The Clean Life Colony ain't well known. It's Ensign's job to make it so. He wants to get all Mammothville talkin' about 'em."

"Where do the Blue Caps come in—and why?"

"The Clean Life Colony boasts a pretty good ball team. Much better than the usual semi-pro club, I'm told. Not that they're any match for my big leaguers, under ordinary conditions. Only Everett Exeter Ensign don't plan the game to be played under ordinary conditions. He has some nutty scheme cookin' which he's sure will pack the park Monday. I don't know what it is myself, but Ensign is comin' here to-night and spill it. You might's well listen in."

So, half an hour later, I was present at the conference between Bobby August and the publicity engineer. Everett Exeter Ensign was a big, bustlin' bimbo who smoked big, brown cigars and talked in a big boomin' voice.

"I'm glad you're here, Mr. Riley," he says to me. "Doubtless you'll find what I have to offer very interestin'. I really think I've got a idea that's a knockout. Unusual—yes. Freakish—perhaps. But it oughta set the whole town talkin'. Mr. August," he turns on Bobby, "do your players swear very much durin' an average game?"

"Do they?" I buts in. "How these old ears have been curled and crisped!"

"Athletes will cut loose now and then," admits Bobby.

"Exactly!" Ensign booms. "The Blue Caps, naturally enough, are more or less addicted to profanity. Clean Life Colony players ain't. Fact is, bad language is strictly taboo at the colony. Reverend Solomon Hackett, who pilots the team, tells me they are most strict in this regard. Members must be clean of mind and tongue. The Clean Livers don't curse or swear on the diamond.

"Now, here's my big idea: Why not impose a penalty for profane speech in Monday's game? For every oath a player utters, chalk up a run for the opposin' team. The umpires to be the judges, of course. Frankly, I believe this arrangement would give the Clean Livers more runs than the Blue Caps and would be an odd handicap that would kinda even up the contest."

"Good gallopin' grief!" breaks out Bobby. "What a idea! You're nuttier than a box of almond bars! It's impossible!"

"It ain't impossible!" Ensign snaps back. "Merely unique. The scorers could be wised up and keep track of the runs by checkin' with the umpires. I spoke to Reverend Hackett about it, and he's heartily in favor of the plan."

"He would be!" growls the dazed Blue Cap manager. "A run for every cuss word! Close decisions would be bound to cost us a dozen runs. No, we can't play ball that way. The fans won't stand for it."

"The fans'll eat it up! You'll jam 'em in! You'll have a record gate!" Ensign insists. "The novelty of it will draw 'em like flies. And we'll get publicity all over the country. Perhaps it will serve as the first step in elevating the standards of the game!"

"You're plottin' a nine innin' nightmare," I says. "The scorers will need addin' machines."

"I knew you'd dig up some dizzy notion, Ensign," chirps Bobby, "but that idea is out! No such whangdoodle for the Blue Caps. After all, baseball is baseball!"

Everett Exeter Ensign never turned a hair, and he was a long jump from bald.

"Listen, Mr. August," he remarks. "Consider my hunch from a practical standpoint. The Blue Caps and the colonists will lure few fans by playin' the usual exhibition contest. Very likely such a game would result in the slaughter of the Clean Livers. In place of that, I'm proposin' somethin' brand-new in baseball. And I believe it'll prove crowd pullin' stuff. We'll have a far more interestin' game, both the Blue Caps and the Clean Life Colony oughta make some berries, and last but not least, the idea serves to emphasize the ideals of the Clean Livers. Why, Mr. August, this should be the diamond classic of the century!"

I could see Bobby was waverin' a bit. So could Ensign. The publicity man kept hammerin' away with his smooth arguments. It took some tonsil exercise, but the Blue Cap pilot finally caved in. The alleged "diamond classic" was on!

Everett Exeter Ensign lost no time. He had four days before the battle and he sure put across the publicity. The newspapers went for the goofy notion like mice leapin' for cheese. Ensign had 'em all loaded up with big spreads and pictures.

Everybody was gabbin' about the comin' game. The cuss word handicap feature caused plenty chucklin', debatin' and bettin'. Gamblers were layin' all kinds of freak bets. More than one baby offered kale that the Blue Caps would swear away the game.

Mammothville bugs turned out in hordes the afternoon of the combat. No exhibition in Blue Cap history ever drew as many cash customers. The old apple orchard looked almost as if a world's series was under way.

Everett Exeter Ensign was up in the press box, beamin' like a locomotive headlight. He was surrounded by kiddin' scribes, some of which had sharpened up a coupla dozen pencils and brought along extra score books.

The Clean Life Colony team got a big hand from the fans. The players didn't differ in appearance from other ball tossers. They wore regulation uniforms and looked like they shaved and cut their hair often. In the field they weren't so bad. Evidently the colonists had played baseball.

Shortly before game time I went over with Silk O'Day—who was umpirin' bases—to meet Reverend Solomon Hackett, leader of the Clean Livers. Hackett was a tall, thin bird with a melancholy map.

While we were discussin' ground rules Bobby August joined us.

"Well, Reverend Hackett," he says, "this'll probably be the craziest game of ball I was ever in. I've told my players to act like clams, or else do their cussin' under their breaths."

Hackett orbed Silk and me seriously.

"I expect the umpires to abide by the special rule. I believe it an excellent provision. In common with other members of the Clean Life Colony, I abhor profanity. Every oath uttered to-day shall cost a run. Is not that the agreement?"

"Thats' our understandin'," I says. "The rule applies to both sides, don't it?'

"Naturally it applies to both sides." Solomon Hackett smiles faintly. "However, I don't think the Clean Livers are likely to throw away any runs. Perhaps the Blue Caps will be equally careful in their speech. I'll be satisfied if the rule doesn't do more than keep the game clean."

"I reckon," mutters Silk O'Day, "it's just too bad I ain't hard of hearin'."

"By the way," goes on the Solomon, "I have one change to make in my announced line-up. Gaspard, our regular centerfielder, fell ill this morning. Unfortunately, our only extra outfielder is laid up with a bad ankle. I was in despair until Mr. Ensign came to the rescue. He produced a player. Although he is not a member of the Clean Life Colony, I trust it will be permissible to use him."

"As long as it ain't Babe Ruth," chirps Bobby August. "Who is he?"

"Mr. Ensign assures me he is known as Silent Smith. Accordin' to Mr. Ensign, Smith is an odd character. Once a talented baseball player, he grew tired of the follies of the world and sought isolation. For several years he has led the existence of a hermit. He seldom speaks, hence his nickname. Mr. Ensign said it was hard to persuade him to participate in to-day's encounter, but his consent was finally gained. He has shown ability in the practice session."

"I guess you're welcome to Silent Smith, whoever he is," says Bobby August. "A hermit, huh? This guy Ensign is full of fast ones."

A few moments later the batteries were announced, there was a mighty roar from the crowd and the ball game began.

The Clean Livers batted first, of course. In the box for the Blue Caps was Jack Gomes, a left-handed rookie. He had speed and stuff, but he seemed to regard the affair as a joke. He tossed a fast one in the groove for the lead-off colonist.

How that worthy socked that olive! When it was winged back to the diamond he was breathin' hard on the third cushion. Young Gomes lost some of his festive air. He settled down to chuck, banishin' the next two hitters on strikes.

"Silent" Smith came up in the fourth spot. He was a husky bird, and far from a kid. Indeed, he was quite grizzled. I could tell by the way he stood at the plate he knew somethin'. He cut the second ball heaved for a sweet single, and the Clean Livers counted one. Solomon Hackett, who played as well as piloted, flied out. The Blue Caps ambled in.

Sage, the midget shortstop, headed the battin' order.

"Come on now, Imp, let's have that run back!" cries Bobby August. "You can do it, Imp. You can get on!"

A stringy southpaw named Samuels was chuckin' for the Clean Livers. He appeared to have a whole armful of crooked ones. He shot the apple near the rubber, but not near enough. "Imp" Sage strolled on four bum ones.

Samuels acted slightly peeved. He walked toward the catcher and let me have this line:

"Isn't your vision impaired? Don't you have a tendency to err in your judgments?"

Bobby August, once one of the game's greatest infielders, had shoved himself into the line-up. He was hittin' next. I heard him titter as he rubbed dirt on the handle of his cue.

"Go on and pitch!" I snaps at Samuels. "I'll call 'em back here!"

"Speak gently, brother, speak gently," gargles Osler, the catcher. "Forget not the sounding brass and tinkling cymbals."

The Blue Cap manager was havin' a fit. I realized I was bein' slipped a brand of spoofin' not in the book.

"Come on! Batter up!" I growls.

August sacrificed, Southpaw Samuels handlin' the onion very nicely. "Guffy" Lewis picked up a chunk of ash.

Guffy was a Blue Cap regular. A swell ball player, but one of the crabbiest bozos who ever snapped rubber bands under his knees. He was a .300 swatter, although somewhat weak against forkhanders. He swung from the port side.

Samuels and he played along until the count was two and two. Then the Colony gunner served him a hook on the inside. Guffy pulled the mossy wheeze of wheelin' away from it, but he couldn't chump Mike Riley. It was a strike.

"You're out!" I yodels.

Guffy spun around. He was flamin' mad.

"What's that? What's that? Say, what in the hell is the matter with you, you blind old. . . ."

He let me have a coupla good, strong phrases.

"Sit down!" I motions. "That'll cost you —and the Blue Caps—precisely three runs, Guffy!"

Lewis blinked, choked and suddenly quit oratin'. Bobby August ran from the pit and led him away, while gleeful scorers were told to make the score 4 to 0 for the Clean Livers. How the stands whooped it up!

Johnson, the followin' hitter, fanned. Sage was stranded on the second hassock.

For five frames the tussle moved along minus any more bad language. Bobby was watchin' his gang, probably threatenin' to wash out their mouths with soap if they made any breaks.

The Blue Caps were leadin' by a score of 5 to 4. Samuels had been nicked for a number of base knocks. Once or twice the Clean Livers had quarreled with my calls, but the colonists confined themselves to remarks like:

"I abjure you, brother, to yield us the benefit of the doubt!"

"You should not have failed to discern that final strike!"

"Your judgment on this play gives rise to a suspicion you were abroad until the wee small hours of the morning, brother!"

"Your powers of observation are exceedingly limited!"

Several times I was on the verge of swearin' myself. This kinda stuff would corral the cashmere of any indicator engineer.

Between the halves of the sixth canto, Silk O'Day and I hit the drinkin' water together. Silent Smith, the hermit gardener of the Clean Livers, had pounded out a hefty double in the first part of the chapter. He was the only colonist findin' Gomes.

"Say, Mike," says Silk, "I seen this Smith before. I dunno where, but I seen him—and his monicker wasn't Smith. He usta be a ball player, all right."

"He still is," I adds.

"Gimme time. I'll place him," he vows.

I didn't doubt it. O'Day was one of the oldest umpires in the league. Years before I came up he was callin' 'em and duckin' 'em. In them days you had to do both.

However, the last of the sixth gave me other things beside Silent Smith to worry about. On a close play at home I called "Rookie" Davis of the Blue Caps out.

Dutch Borton was coachin' on third, and he had sent Davis in. He flew off the handle like the head of a ten-cent hammer. Dutch can be a rough cookie too. He opened up on me with everythin' he had—and he had plenty. Before I chased him to the bench he had cursed over five runs for the Clean Livers, makin' the score 9 to 5. If other athletes hadn't muzzled him the scorers might've chalked up a hundred tallies.

The crowd was havin' a great time. Those fans who weren't laughin' themselves sick give me the raspberry, loganberry and all the rest of the berry patch. No matter what kinda ball game it is, the umpires' cheers are always hisses.

The Clean Livers didn't hold their gift lead long. The Blue Caps busted out in a rally in the last of the seventh which included triples by Sage and Guffy Lewis and a drive into the bleachers by big Buck Graham. Before the barrage ended five runs registered and the stringy Samuels was anklin' for the showers. A small biscuit called Prescott finished out the frame, feedin' the Blue Caps slow, sloppy hooks which fooled 'em after Samuels' swifter shoots.

In the eighth Prescott was less deceivin', and the Blue Caps marked up two more. Silent Smith pulled two nice catches in center this frame and prevented further damage. The grizzled old boy sure did look good in haulin' down them hoists. He could play pasture—and how!

The Clean Livers started the first of the ninth with the count 12 to 9 against 'em. Ordinarily the fans would've been stampedin' toward the exits. But to-day they were stickin'. This wasn't no ordinary ball game. A guy couldn't tell what might happen before three biscuits were retired.

With one in the cemetery, a Clean Liver popped out a fluke handle hit. Rookie Davis put the boots to one, and two runners embellished the hassocks. Jack Gomes lost the range and gave another colonist an Annie Oakley. The pillows were packed, and it begun to be hard to hear whispers.

Gomes braced up and checked in a strikeout for the second demise of the canto. Then Silent Smith trudged to the dish.

Knowin' the vet wasn't any custard, Gomes was careful. He tried to bear down on every ball. He couldn't quite crease the corners, and the count went to three and one. His next chuck was an outside hook. I thought it cut an edge and called a strike. Smith wheeled around. Throughout the fray he'd been noisy as an oyster. He didn't say nothin' now, but if thoughts could blister I sure would've needed the arnica bottle.

Jack Gomes wound up. He whipped a fast one down the slot. Smith whaled away at it.

Wham!

Right on the pick Silent smote her. The onion soared to deep left center, bounced to the score board. Three colonists crossed the platter, thereby tyin' the score. The blow was a cinch triple, and there was a chance of stretchin' it into a home run, which would send the Clean Livers into the lead.

Smith pushed his old pegs around the sacks. Passin' third, he dug his cleats in for the pan. He slid just as Catcher Anfinson glommed the relayed heave from the suburbs.

That play was plenty close. Indeed, it was tougher to call than the Rookie Davis decision. Yet, by the margin of a mosquito's bill, Anfinson had Smith. So I saw it.

"Out!" I squawks.

"Oh, Lord! Oh, merciful Lord!" I heard Solomon Hackett spout.

"Benign Providence! I beseech the jawbone of an ass, that I may slay one of its ilk!" yelps a second Clean Liver.

But my ears had heard nothin' yet. Smith come outa the dust. He was a guy transformed. His eyes flamed. His face was a huge snarl. And he was no longer a clam. Believe me, he broadcast!

"You blind yegg! You porch-climbin', widow-robbin', cock-eyed abortion of an umpire! Why, damn it to hell! I was safe a mile, you dash-blank-dash, you! Oh, you double-dyed, triple-plated blank son of blank ancestry!"

He blasted me with a cussin' that put a permanent wave in my wool. The best of Guffy Lewis and Dutch Borton seemed pitifully amateurish beside his volleys of vituperation. I wasn't just scorched; I was burned to a cinder!

If a coupla Blue Caps hadn't grabbed him, I guess Smith would've tried to boom on me. Several other members of the Clean Life Colony were ravin' at the decision, and what drifted my way didn't listen so pure and sweet. And did the fans ride me? Be your age!

Solemn Solomon Hackett attempted to calm his alleged Clean Livers. His melancholy mug was longer than the faces in a dentist's waitin' room.

My own nanny broke her rope. I snarled at the athletes millin' around me:

"Keep quiet! That was the third out! While the hit tied the score, by virtue of the special rule under which this filbert frolic is bein' played the Blue Caps have been presented with enough runs to win a dozen ball games! I'd say, conservatively, the final tally is 87 to 12, in favor of the Blue Caps!"

"We're satisfied to let the score be considered as a tie and go to bat in the last half," says Bobby August, gettin' his features straight.

"Not by a hell of a sight!" I yodels, bein' very much in a swearin' mood myself. "That damn fool rule was made, and it has to be followed. This game's over!"

"The umpire is quite right," says Solomon Hackett. "We agreed to abide by the rule. My team concedes the loss of the contest. We shall leave the field. I cannot tell you to what depths of chagrin this has plunged me!"

I made the announcement to the scorers. A few fans jeered, and a lot of cushions flowed onto the diamond. But most of the bugs started for home holdin' their sides.

Suddenly I glimpsed a familiar face on the playin' field. Everett Exeter Ensign was headin' for this roughneck Smith miscalled "Silent." The grizzled gardener still lathered at the lips. And the great publicity expert himself semed highly annoyed.

"Confound you, Hooligan!" he snorts. "Didn't I—"

"Hooligan! That's him! Beef Hooligan!" comes a hoarse voice behind me. Silk O'Day is talkin'. "He played with Chicago nearly twenty years back. He was a holy terror in them days! I never run up against him, but I know umpires who did. He ain't a hermit. He's been livin' on his farm up the state for years and playin' ball in the sticks. Yes, sir! Old Beef Hooligan!"

"Listen!" I says. "Here's the inside stuff!"

Everett Exeter Ensign was soundin' off in front of the vet.

"You blunderin' bonehead!" he yowls. "You've ruined the whole shootin' match. You made my clients a laughin' stock by your coarse outbreak. I paid you a hundred bucks to keep your mouth shut, no matter what happened. You agreed, but look what you've done, Hooligan! You've given the Clean Life Colony a terrible black eye!"

Probably Everett Exeter Ensign would-'ve said more. Words were his stock in trade. Only, Beef Hooligan didn't let him. All at once his right arm shot forth. A bunch of fives smacked the publicity man square between the lamps. Ensign hit the dirt. No umpire was needed to pronounce him out!

"You can have your damn dough back!" rasps the late Smith. "A hundred bucks or a thousand don't make no difference! I still claim I was safe, and I ain't arguin' about it!"

He went away frothin'.

"Speakin' of black eyes," I chirps, "I've a hunch Everett Exeter Ensign is gonna have a pair to match that one the Clean Life Colony got!"

Silk O'Day and I departed from the scene of cuss words, carnage and cushions together.

"Feature that rabid old ruffian bein' tossed into such a Brazilian brawl under a label like Silent Smith!" chuckles Silk. "If it hadn't been for that close one in the ninth—but once a ball player, always a ball player, Mike!"

Which is just what I warbled in the beginnin'. The famed leopard ain't got a single spot on the noble athlete when it comes to permanent freckles.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Phantom of the Night

A Complete Rangeland Novelette

By

Oscar Schisgall

A Yarn of Range-Treachery, Mysterious Night Riders and the Crimson Flash of Six-Guns Barking Out Their Messages of Death

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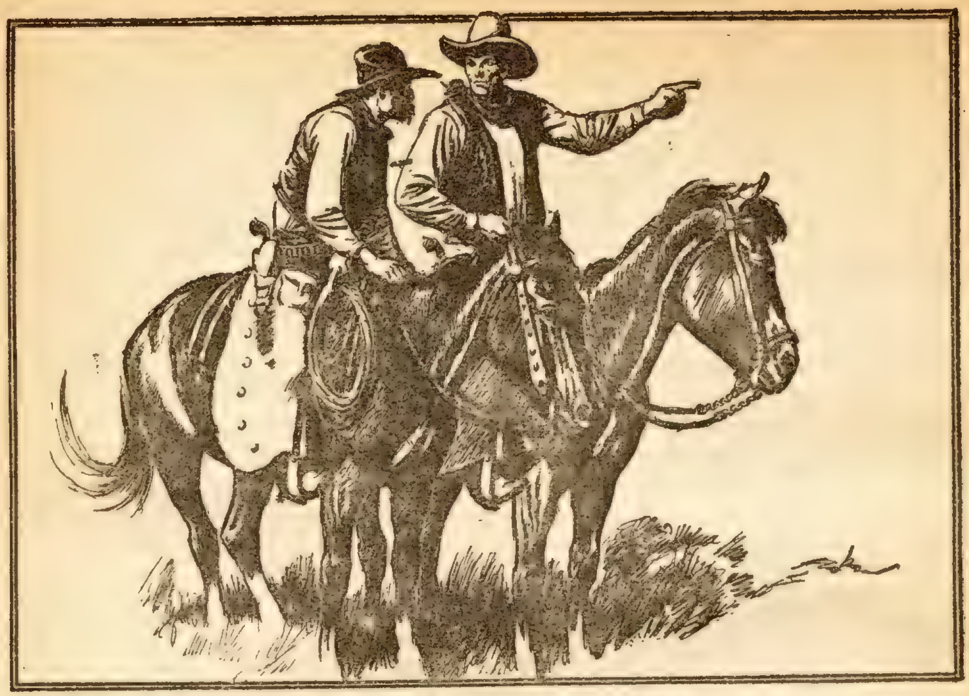


BRANDED MEN

By Hapsburg Liebe

Lead, hot from lightning six-guns, burns a gang of rustlers with a mark that stays.

BIG, young Jim Valentine and his wizened, long-mustached, little companion rode their dust-stained horses into Buck's Town about noon of a broiling hot day. They dismounted before a restaurant, and had just tossed their reins over pegs in the sun-baked hitching-rack when the sudden crash of six-guns up the street broke the quiet sacrilegiously, like stones thrown into a cathedral by the hand of a blaspheming Belial—

Bang! Bang!—two shots, one following the other quickly.

Old Kid Brazos had bright lights in his eternally squinted eyes as he said to Jim Valentine: "I reckon times ain't changed so much, after all. It was a man tryin' to stick up that there little Cattlemen's Bank lone-handed, and he's fluked somewhere, looks to me."

This proved to be the case. The would-be robber, a stranger, had met the sheriff at the bank's main entrance. A glance at the bandana mask was enough for the officer, and the two had exchanged shots instantly. The officer hadn't missed. The masked man staggered backward, dropping his smoking six-gun, and fell at the edge of the street.

The two newcomers to Buck's Town joined the crowd of miners, townsmen, and off-duty cowboys that gathered around the supine figure. Sheriff Lee Tyson bent and tore off the bandana mask. To his wonderment and the wonderment of the onlookers, the dying man's stubbily-bearded, bronzed left cheek carried a burned-in brand much like the brands carried by range cattle, though it was so raggedly scarred as to be not at once decipherable.

The sheriff knelt beside the hapless breaker of the law.

"In the case o' bank-robbers, we always shoot first and ask questions later," he growled. "Got anything to say, hombre?"

"Yeah," weakly but gamely answered the hard-bitten man on the ground. "I got this to say: there's more, and they'll shore settle with you—for drillin' me this way—"

His voice trailed out to nothing. Lee Tyson bent closer.

"Yuh say there's more. More—what?"

The unknown had no further talk left in him. The Grim Reaper was calling urgently, and would not be denied. But the fast stiffening, thin lips shaped two words soundlessly, spaced far apart:

"Branded—men."

His jet-black eyes burned vengefully as their lids dropped over them slowly and for the last time.

The sheriff, himself lean and hard-bitten, had the lifeless clay and the strange horse taken off the street. Then he went back to his office, which occupied one front corner of a low, squat building that was taken up chiefly by Puma County's jail.

Jim Valentine and his companion followed the officer. Valentine introduced himself to Tyson, and proceeded:

"As for my pardner here—Sheriff, if yore memory is half good, you'll remember hearin', a long time ago, of a young two-gun Texas cyclone who was knowed as Kid Brazos because he was from the Brazos River country. Mebbe you'll remember also that he was caught and tried, and that he drawed a life term in prison at the end o' his swath. Well, this here is him—Old Kid Brazos, we call him now—the Governor pardoned him after he'd done twenty-five years like a gentleman, and I'll be responsible for his good behavior. Yuh see, we're puttin' all our cards on the table face up, so to speak."

Lee Tyson shook hands with Old Kid Brazos. Jim Valentine pushed his wide-brimmed, high-peaked Stetson back a little on his head, and went on:

"We've just rode in from Texas, our home state, Sheriff. My oldest brother, Chapman Valentine—he was the black sheep of us all, but the best feller in the world. He owned a cow outfit over in New Mexico, and he had some trouble there, my hunch tells me, because he sold out all of a sudden and bought a ranch up on Little Bitter Fork, not so very far from this town."

For no apparent reason, Jim Valentine paused. Lee Tyson nodded.

"Yeah; I know that ranch; the Quarter-Circle V, it is. Go ahead with what yuh was tellin' me."

"All right," Valentine said. "Well, this hunch o' mine says that Chap's trouble, whatever it was, follered him from New Mexico. He'd always wrote to Dad faithful every month, and he never mentioned any trouble, but he wouldn't, not wantin' to worry Dad. Howsomever, he's missed three months writin' home now, and I decided somethin' musta went wrong, and so me and Old Kid is here to investigate. Can yuh help us out any, Sheriff?"

Tyson frowned, sat down at his cheap desk, and indicated two other chairs. The visitors seated themselves.

"Yore brother," the officer drawled sympathetically, "is dead. He was shot through a window, by a party unknown to us, out at the Quarter-Circle V ranch house. He musta been lookin' for somethin' to happen, because he'd sold every hoof o' his cattle and deposited the money in the Cattlemen's Bank here, shortly before he was shot. We couldn't find any letters or anything else that would tell us who his folks was, and nobody seemed to know anything about him, which will explain why you wasn't notified.

"Me and a posse found him before he'd got cold," Tyson continued. "There's been a organized ring o' stick-ups workin' this country for a long time, and my posse and me was comin' back to town from a losin' race with some o' this ring, and had stopped at the Quarter-Circle V for water. Then a odd thing happened. I left Bob Henley with the body while the rest of us rode on to town to arrange for the funeral, and somebody knocked Bob in the head from behind and stole yore brother's corpse and we ain't seen it since that day!"

Jim Valentine and Old Kid Brazos could only stare. To Sheriff Tyson the tragedy and mystery were not new; he pursued in an emotionless voice:

"Big Chap—he was knowed as that, I understand—musta thought he could take care o' his enemies by hisself, because he never asked for either help or protection, not even from his cowboys. I didn't know him much, but he was a whale of a big man, and I've heard he was as swift as blue lightnin' with his six-guns. I shore hope you don't inherit his enemies along with his ranch and his money, but I'm afraid yuh will, and so I'm advisin' yuh to sell out the place and high-tail it right back to Texas as soon as possible."

The clear gray eyes of young Valentine narrowed and glistened.

"No," he replied, "I reckon I won't do that. In fact, I aim to restock the Quarter-Circle V and run her. Chap's enemies won't have the satisfaction o' knowin' that his brother was afraid of 'em. Old Kid will prob'ly stay with me and help; eh, Old Kid?"

"Shorely," was the prompt answer. "Say, Sheriff, what do yuh know about that brand on the dead stick-up's left cheek, if I can make so bold as to ask yuh?"

"Absotively nothin' a-tall," Tyson replied, "except that it seemed to be either a E or a B. I don't mind tellin' yuh that the thing has got me guessin'. And he mentioned more branded men. Well, let 'em come; me, I've got more bullets! You, Valentine, does that there famous hunch o' yores have anything to say in this respect?"

Again the clear gray eyes narrowed.

"Yeah, she does; she whispers that there's some connection between my brother's death and these branded hombres and that organized ring o' stick-ups you said was operatin' in yore county, Sheriff. Well, Old Kid, let's hunt the feed bag—I'm so hungry my stummick thinks my head's been cut plumb off. See yuh later, Sheriff; so long!"

The callers rose and went out to the street.

LITTLE BITTER FORK was incorrectly named; its waters were sweet, and they were also unfailing. It rose in the Santa Josefa Range, divided the great Santa Josefa Basin in halves, then lost its identity in that of another small creek. Midway of the Basin, in a cottonwood-lined bend, stood the Quarter-Circle V headquarters. The buildings were old and rambling, but in a fair state of repair.

Young Jim Valentine and Old Kid Brazos dismounted before the ranch house late in the afternoon. They left their horses' reins trailing, and went quietly up the path that lead to the verandah steps. Each had taken care that his six-gun was loose in its holster.

But before they had covered half of the little distance Valentine signed his companion to a halt, and pointed at the ground just ahead of them. Old Kid Brazos looked and saw footprints that were unmistakably fresh. Valentine whispered:

"Sneak around to the back door and stop any jasper that may happen to come out. I think somebody's been stayin' here."

The old ex-outlaw nodded and hurried noiselessly around the house.

The other tiptoed up the steps and across the verandah. The front door was ajar. He walked softly into the living room, then into the other rooms. There wasn't much furniture except for a table or so, a bed, chairs, a cook-stove, and other such bare necessities; plainly, it had been the home of a bachelor.

Valentine saw nobody, heard no sound. He made his way to the back door and looked out. On the ground just outside Old Kid Brazos lay, unconscious and bleeding from a wound above his right ear!

"What the hell!" cried Valentine.

He saw no other person anywhere. Quickly he caught the slight figure up in his arms, carried it to the bed inside and put it down there. Then he found a tin basin and pumped water from the creek's level, bathed the old man's wound and stopped its bleeding, and bound it up in a bandana. Soon afterward the squinted desert eyes opened uncertainly.

"Jimmy—" came in a mumbling voice — "is that you, Jimmy?"

"Yeah, old-timer," the younger man answered, "it's me, all right. Who clouted yuh, remember?"

Old Kid Brazos was fully himself an instant later. He struggled to a sitting position in the bed, then swung his feet to the floor and began to stare hard at his friend.

"Jimmy, listen. He comes out o' that back door like a ghost, with no more noise, and he hands me a buster with somethin'—a six-gun's barrel, likely—that he had ready. His left cheek was branded, Jimmy—I seen it as plain as I see you now; it was a big R!"

"Well, wouldn't that jar yore kinfolks in Patagonia!" exclaimed Valentine. "You ain't dreamin', are yuh?"

"Me, dreamin'? I shore ain't, Jimmy. I seen him for only a split second, but—I seen him."

"I notice he didn't take yore gat."

"I reckon he only wanted to get away, Jimmy. Say, do yuh reckon them branded jaspers has been usin' this place for a hangout?"

Valentine frowned. "Somebody's been hangin' around here a good deal, anyhow. I seen burnt matches and cigarette stubs and some empty bottles here and there on the floor. I—"

He broke off short. One of their two horses had neighed outside, and that meant a third horse or more. For a moment Valentine kept very still and listened. Then he went on tiptoe toward the front, and the wounded man rose from the bed and tiptoed unsteadily after him.

Just as the pair reached a front window, a footstep rang from somewhere in the rear of the house. The two immediately drew guns and leveled them, and waited breathlessly. There were other footsteps, cautious in a degree and yet heavy, those of a large man, without any doubt.

And then a huge figure was framed in the dining room doorway; it was a somewhat haggard, shaggy-headed and short-bearded man of middle age. A three-inch letter R was burned into his left cheek. He was the branded giant who had struck Old Kid Brazos down less than an hour before! He wore two cartridge-belts, and each carried a holstered, ivory-handled Colt forty-five.

The sun had slipped behind the sawtooth peaks of the Santa Josefa Range, and the light inside the ranch house was almost dim, but Jim Valentine recognized the newcomer instantly.

"Chapman!" he cried.

Chapman Valentine it was. Jim holstered his six-gun and went toward his brother happily, his right hand outstretched. Big Chap had been his boyhood ideal. He found his hand seized, squeezed so hard that it hurt, and dropped, all within two seconds.

"I knowed yore saddle, Jimmy," said Chapman, his bass voice rumbling like a big drum. "It's the one I sent you a year ago for a birthday present. I simply had to come back and ask you: Is the folks at home all right?"

"Yeah, but a heap worried about you," Jim told him. "Sheriff Lee Tyson said you'd been killed, and that yore body'd been stole, Chap. How about it? Is Tyson crooked?"

"Why, no, I reckon he ain't crooked," Big Chap drawled. "Yuh see, son, it was this way. Tyson thought I was dead, and he left Bob Henley with me, and I comes to and knocks Bob out from behind, thinkin' he was a enemy. Things goes all dark to me again, and when I comes around once more I'm in a strange town where nobody knows me, and I couldn't remember a dang thing. A doctor picked me up and made a sort o' study out o' me, and after awhile he decided the bullet that'd hit me had bent a piece o' skull in on my brain; he takes me to Denver for a operation, and it made me as good as new. Simple, ain't it?"

"Yeah—mebbe," his brother said. He went on: "What's the main, big idea o' these branded hombres? Who are they, Chap, anyhow?"

The elder Valentine caressed a bearded jaw with a forefinger.

"Who are they?" he repeated. "Well, le's see: there's Bill Greech, Sam Luckey, Bunt Franish, Pedro Jones—but you don't know any o' them sidewinders, Jimmy. Say, you keep yore mouth shut and go back—"

Jim interrupted: "I notice you're one o' the branded jaspers, Chap. How come?"

"Me?" Chapman Valentine's keen gray

eyes sparkled oddly. Suddenly he snapped up straight. He looked like some great D'Arcy, standing there looking down upon his six-foot brother. "There's no time to gossip like a bunch o' old wimmen, son; I'm in a most hell of a hurry. You go back to Buck's Town and wait there quiet until I wind up a little pressin' business I got out here—"

There was a thunderous cra-a-ash. A big revolver's blazing muzzle appeared at a window. Chapman Valentine's rumpled Stetson jumped a little on his shaggy head. He ducked, caught his brother by the belt in one huge hand and Old Kid Brazos by an arm with the other. Almost before the pair realized what was going on the giant had crowded them into an otherwise empty closet and locked them in!

"By God, they're next to me, Jimmy, but I'll not have you killled!" roared Chapman Valentine as his departing footsteps fairly shook the old ranch house.

"Dang you, Chap—yuh think I'm still a kid?" Jim yelled resentfully.

There came the muffled sound of a shot outside, and then another. A third, and yet another followed, each report dimmer than the one preceding it, which suggested men in the saddle and riding fast.

The two in the closet were hammering the door desperately with their shoulders. The thrust was short, and the door was strong; but after minutes that seemed age-long to them, their united efforts broke the barrier down and they half fell into the now dusky living room.

Valentine recovered his balance quickly and ran out to the verandah with his revolver ready in his hand. All was deathly silent. He saw nothing that was of the slightest interest to him—nothing, that is, except that their horses had moved a hundred paces during the time of the shooting.

"Where the devil did Chapman go, anyhow?" asked Old Kid Brazos at his shoulder.

"Through the cottonwoods down there at the creek, likely," Jim answered. "It's almost dark, or we'd try to foller him. I reckon we can pick up his trail in the mornin'. Chap said I was to go back to Buck's Town and wait, but—I reckon I won't. He's always thought o' me as a kid, dang him."

The old Texan grinned and touched his bandana bandage gingerly.

"Looks like Chap might've apologized for that," he said.

Valentine shook his head. "You don't know Chap, old-timer. He'd lay down his life for yuh without a whimper, but he wouldn't apologize if he'd accident'ly killed yuh. It's how he's built, yuh see."

Young Jim paced the verandah floor, thinking, thinking, trying to interpret that strange tangle of circumstances and human lives. The voice of the little old man brought him back to himself.

"Well, Jimmy, what has yore hunch got to say now?"

"My hunch?" It came with a shrug. "She's plumb down to zero, I don't mind tellin' yuh. I shore don't know what to believe."

"Reckon it's possible that Chapman is the boss o' the branded bunch, and they've turned on him because he wouldn't be low-down enough to suit their fancy?" asked Old Kid Brazos.

Another shrug was the only answer he got.

At fair daybreak on the next morning, the two were leading their horses and scanning the ground ahead for the necessarily deep and widely spaced hoofprints of Chapman Valentine's mount and that of his enemy. Among the cottonwoods near the creek they discovered the hoofprints, and accompanying them there was another trail that was not so distinct —only a tiny splash of scarlet here and there. One of the flying bullets of the evening before, at least, had found a mark.

Valentine at once swung himself into the saddle, and Old Kid Brazos did likewise. The trail led them almost in a straight line toward a pass, not easily discernible because of the distance, through the rock-ribbed and barren Santa Josefas.

"If it was Chap that was bleedin'—" the younger of the pair growled, broke off abruptly.

But it hadn't been his brother. Midway of the precipitously-walled pass the two came upon a dead bay horse, one so game that it had died before it had fallen. There was a stiff streak of blood zigzagging down one foreleg from a bullet hole near the animal's neck. It was branded with a big V that had a quarter-circle under it, cup-and-saucer fashion.

Jim Valentine's searching gaze came to rest on the over-size, silver-trimmed Cheyenne saddle.

"Chap's," he said bluntly.

They rode on, not too fast, alert and watching. They could not tell what might lie around the next boulder or the next bend in the gorge.

"I wonder if Chapman was workin' in the lead, in this race," Old Kid Brazos muttered.

"You say foolish things, sometimes," his companion replied. "Chap never works in the lead in any race. Keep yore peepers peeled wide, old-timer. My hunch is nearly runnin' out at the top now; somethin' shore is goin' to happen, and that a heap soon, I'm tellin yuh!"

At the end of the pass they drew their mounts up sharply, and held their breath for a moment at that which greeted their eyes. Immediately before them was a drop so abrupt that it would test any horse's ability to descend. Beyond lay a flat, and in this flat there was a tiny town of unpainted, rough-board houses and one big and barnlike building, also of rough boards and unpainted, that had once been the usual combination of saloon and dance hall. There was no visible sign of life!

"What do yuh know about that, Jimmy?" whispered the ex-outlaw.

"Mushroom gold town, and the gold played out sudden after a flyin' start," Valentine said. "Well, I'll ride down there and see what I can see. You better stay here for the present, Old Kid. Mebbe she ain't half as dead as she looks, and in case I meet odds o' more'n two to one yuh might use yore own good judgment about high-tailin' it back to Buck's Town after the sheriff and a posse."

"You said her, Jimmy. All right, I'll wait here."

Valentine's horse took the down grade willingly, bravely, slipping a good deal but never losing its footing altogether.

Not long afterward the young Texan was riding with seeming carelessness along the one street, though his gaze missed nothing that was within its range. He noted that the windows of the barnlike structure had been boarded up on the inside, and he guessed correctly that the floor's material had been used for that. Above the front door there was a faded sign that gave the place the name:

THE PIZENED PUP

And then there was a visible sign of life.

It was a very tall and lanky man of middle age in the clothing of an old-fashioned gambler *de luxe.* He wore a Prince Albert coat of black, a soiled white shirt and a black string tie, gray trousers, high-heeled Spanish boots and a wide-brimmed black hat. With his hands in his trousers-pockets he came strolling out of one of the sun-scalded houses. His manner seemed most inoffensive.

Except that he had mustaches longer even than those of Old Kid Brazos, he was smoothly shaven, and the burned-in R on his left cheek was as plain as though it had just been painted there.

"Howdy, brother," he drawled, smiling. "Welcome to our fair city. As the poet says, all are gone from here and I alone am left. Brother, I am the Reverend—"

Whee-ee-ee-ee!—the interrupting neigh of a horse came from the general direction of The Pizened Pup. Jim Valentine's roan threw up its head and answered promptly: *Whee-ee-ee-ee!*

"The Reverend Thaddeus Silverthorn," rather pompously proceeded the lanky one. "That nicker what you just heard was my pore little hawss, in a corral back o' the large buildin'. I reckon he's lonesome, there all by hisself. I judge you're a stranger here, brother."

The newcomer's keen gaze had picked out two small humps under the other's coat, one at each hip; of course, they were the handles of revolvers. A minister of the Gospel wearing one six-gun might occasion no wonderment, here in this wild country, but—two! Valentine curbed a mirthless smile. This was no simple, ordinary wolf in sheep's clothing, by any means. The "Reverend Silverthorn" went on smoothly:

"I judge you're a stranger here, po'dner. Well, she was some live little town in her heyday, though mighty sinful I'm afraid. Badger Tail was, and is, her name—"

Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee-ee-ee!—cut in a whole volley of equine courtesies.

"Say, Reverend," Jim Valentine blurted, unwisely, "how many hawsses have you got here, anyhow? Sounds like a dozen, shore. I'm wonderin' why yuh'd shut 'em up in the dance hall when there's grass for the pickin'. And also I'm wonderin' about that brand on yore face. I happened to see a sheriff drill a hombre in Buck's Town yesterday, who wore that same R on his map. What about it?"

"It was Bud Sheddars, the d—doggoned fool—"

The man on the ground caught his tongue, and forced a laugh. "Why, ain't you never heard about that brand? But the poke o' yore John B. hat tells me you're from Texas. Well, brother, we are a religious sect. There is them which calls us fanatics, but—"

His right hand had been creeping, creeping toward the big revolver at his right hip, under his coat. Jim Valentine's right hand had been creeping, creeping toward the butt of his own .45. It was the youthful Texan that beat in the draw—the other dropped his weapon and jerked his hands upward, and as he did it he shouted:

"Pay him off, boys!"

An R-branded face and a six-gun's muzzle appeared in every doorway and every window on the farther side of the street, it seemed to Valentine. There were times when he knew the difference between courage and sheer foolhardiness, and this, fortunately, was one of the times. Two men he would have shot it out with, but not with all these; not when he was an open target and they had cover!

Like a lightning-flash, he jumped off the roan and dove into a narrow passageway between two of the sun-scalded houses; it was to save his horse as well as himself. . . .

The six-guns roared, and heavy bullets tore bits of wood from the house corners behind him. When he was only fairly out of their sight he stumbled and fell headlong, but he staved off certain death by rolling quickly under one of the two houses and then into a depression, below the ground's level, that was deep enough to hold him.

He lay still there in the hole, his revolver ready, determined to sell out at the highest cost possible if it came to that. A man, two men, three, were soon on their knees in the passageway and peering under both houses; but none of them guessed that there was a depression that would hide the fugitive, and Valentine escaped their eyes. Then they straightened up, and more men came. Valentine made a count of the pairs of feet that he could see. There were eight, eight of the branded band, at least.

It was evident that consternation reigned among them. The voice of the one that had called himself Silverthorn, now a voice of iron and ice, called authoritatively for silence and got it immediately, and the eavesdropper knew that he was the leader.

"You fellers cut out the *habla.* He didn't make the pass, or we'd 've seen him. Likely he's one o' Tyson's deputies sashayin' around, and if he lives to get back to Tyson—well, it'll shore be up to us to nail Big Chap's hide on the front door o' The Pizened Pup and high-tail it back to New Mex or elsewhere in the dim distance. Nice pickin's over here, all right, but—ah, hell; them dang hawsses had to nicker and spile everything! Whose idea was it to hide 'em in the dance hall in the daytime, anyhow?"

"Pedro Jones's," somebody answered, in self-defense.

"Well, Pede, don't yuh be so damn brilliant the next time, or I'll—" The leader paused significantly, then continued:

"It's boots and saddles for you, Pede, and you, Weasel Phillips, and you, Bunt Franish. Round up that handsome and dashin' Texas *gallo* and fetch him to me. I'll give yuh two hours; get that? The rest of us will stay here and keep house, as it were—mebbe we'll need to pervide entertainment for more deputies. Well, yuh ain't tied, Pedro; warm up some hawssflesh!"

The eight moved out of the space between the two houses, three of them running. There was the sound of a big door banging open, the clatter of hoofs, and the three rode out of Badger Tail in different directions. Jim Valentine, in his hole under the house floor, breathed easier. He began to wonder about Chapman. Where *was* Chapman?

It occurred to Jim that he was in no manner bound to follow his big, buck-wild brother into death traps such as this, death traps that in all probability were of his brother's own making. And then he laughed inwardly at himself for having harbored the thought for a moment. He knew full well that he would follow Big Chap, the ideal of his childhood and boyhood, into the very bottom kettle of Hades.

All became very quiet. Lying hidden galled young Valentine. To him, there was a hint of cowardice about it. Soon he fell upon a plan.

Moving cautiously, he would crawl under house after house until he had come to the one farthest out, then he would make a dash for it with the intention of joining the sheriff later; he reasoned that Old Kid Brazos had heard the concerted firing and ridden for Buck's Town. There was, he remembered, enough scrub for fair cover as far as the abrupt approach to the pass.

He set out at once, and made one house, a second, and a third, without having been discovered.

Under the rear of the third, the interior of which was unpartitioned and in one large room, he caught the sound of heavy breathing just above him, and stopped his crawling and turned an ear upward to listen. Something fell through a crack in the rough floor and splashed on his cheek. He wiped it off. His fingers came away red.

It was a drop of blood.

Then he heard a voice, mumbling, half delirious, a voice that was like the very low rumble of a bass drum.

"By God! I'm bleedin' again."

Jim Valentine caught his breath. Chapman! . . . wounded, bound hand and foot, of course, was within half a yard of him. Now Jim thought he knew what the branded leader had meant, when he'd talked of nailing Big Chap's hide to the front door of Badger Tail's erstwhile saloon and dance hall. He risked a whisper:

"Chap!" with his lips close to a crack. Again: "Chap!"

Above, the elder Valentine took a firm grip on himself.

"Is that you, Jim?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Absotively. How bad are yuh hurt, old son?"

Chapman was alert now. "Bullet under my shoulder. Gun butt clout on the head. I been comin' and goin'. Jim, what'd yuh foller me for? In a hurry to get to the graveyard? Lay still until night, and then make a break for it!"

"You go to hell," Jim said affectionately. "I'm stickin' a knife-blade up through this crack. Cut yore wrist and ankle ropes on it, then sneak out the back window and we'll get away together—quick!"

Two more minutes, and Big Chap had severed the ropes that bound him.

"But I reckon I won't run," he whispered. "When they come in here again, not knowin' I'm free, I'll snatch me a gat from 'em and do some execution with it. I owe it to the respectability o' my immortal soul to lick Bill Creech, son."

"Who's Bill Creech?"

"The king-pin of 'em. He's a cross between a sidewinder, a Gila lizard, and a hydrophobia-skunk. It was him branded me. I—"

"Ssssh!" cautioned Jim. "Somebody's comin'!"

There were heavy footfalls on the narrow porch. The front door swung open, and Bill Creech and four other men stamped across the room toward Chapman

Valentine. Jim crawled from his refuge, ran around to the door, and waited. . . .

The wounded giant lay with ropes about his wrists and ankles as before, except that the ropes were cut. He looked upward with eyes half closed.

"If yuh got any prayin' to do, hoddang yuh," growled Bill Creech, "pray now!"

He bent close to seize Big Chap by the collar. Big Chap's hands came to life with amazing swiftness—he had Creech's two .45's and they were throwing fire and lead in a thunderous roar. An instant later Jim Valentine sprang with lightning swiftness into the room, his own six-gun barking.

The five men, some of them wounded, had thrown themselves flat on the floor to escape that double fusilade of bullets. The element of surprise had been as perfect as it had been cyclonic.

"Valentine day," observed Big Chap, in the grimmest of humor.

"You said it," drawled Jim.

Almost before they had disarmed and securely bound the five, the crash of exploding gunpowder came from the street outside. Young Valentine rushed out to see little Old Kid Brazos standing with his back to the closed front door of The Pizened Pup and pouring hot lead at Pedro Jones and Weasel Phillips; he had already shot Bunt Franish down and taken his six-gun, and now he had two.

"Stay out o' this, Jimmy," he yelled—*Bang!*— "I used to lick three men—" *Bang!* "—and I believe I can do it yet—" *Bang! Bang! Bang!*

In that moment he was the lightning-quick, straight-shooting Kid Brazos of thirty years before, and he gloried in it. Soon Phillips and Jones went down, shot up badly but not fatally.

"I'm proud of yuh, old-timer!" cried Jim Valentine. "I thought yuh'd gone after the Buck's Town sheriff."

"The odds didn't seem enough for me to go after Tyson, Jimmy. All right, I'll fork hawssflesh and bring him out now. I'm shore glad yuh found Chapman."

The Valentines roped Franish, Phillips, and Jones.

"You was always curious, Jimmy, I remember," Chapman said. "Well, here's the short tale o' the big, black sheep o' the family—"

He laughed a little, and told it:

"In the state I was in before I went to New Mex, cow thieves had the authorities o' my county either under control or buffaloed. I got the goods on these thieves, after they'd nearly ruined me, but I couldn't get a single conviction. So I caught 'em myself and branded 'em; the R means *Rustler!* Then they lined up under Bill Creech and was so bad that I sold out and went to New Mex so I wouldn't be hung for killin' some of 'em. They trailed me to New Mex. I didn't like my ranch there, and I sold out again and settled in this state. Still they trailed me, and I sold my stock to keep 'em from stealin' it. Creech had shore got to be a bad hombre, son.

"Well," Big Chap pursued, "you know, Jimmy, about me bein' shot and the operation that straightened out my mind. When I'd come back to the Quarter-Circle V, Creech and his gang finds me asleep and brands *me* with the R brand!— Not that I care a miner's dang about bein' purty, and there ain't a man livin' with enough insides in him to call me a rustler. But this made it a plain case o' seein' who lived and who died, and with yore help—and the little old geezer's who went after Tyson—I've won on a clean ticket."

He smiled, and added: "I reckon Sheriff Tyson will admire to gather in Bill Creech and his men; they're the stick-up ring that's been drivin' Tyson crazy for a long time, and they're wearin' and carryin' enough o' the loot to prove it!"

"Yeah?" half gasped Jim Valentine. "Well, my hunch told me there was a connection."

"Yeah," said Big Chap. "Son, I've never loved the law—wouldn't even go to it for help, here lately; but I was wrong; we got to have law. S'pose we restock the Quarter-Circle V and runs her handsome as law-abidin' citizens, you and me and the little old geezer; huh?"

The young Texan smiled.

"I'd be tickled plumb outrageous pink."

RESTLESS GUNS

A SIX-PART, QUICK-TRIGGER WESTERN NOVEL

By William Colt MacDonald

PART FOUR

Read in the opening paragraphs the complete details of what has happened, and go on with the story.

HOT from an unsuccessful revolution in Mexico, into the wild cowtown of Cuarta City ride Tuscon Smith and Stony Brooke, two rambling waddies with itching trigger-fingers.

After using their six-guns to good advantage in helping Terry Kellicut, owner of the Box TK Ranch, to clean the badmen out of the Warbonnet Saloon, they learn from him that one Hawk Blackwood is seeking to gain control of the community. Already he owns the Warbonnet and the local honkytonk, controls Judge Mandell and Marshal Laramie Lyons, has frightened the sheriff out of town, and gained possession of the Bar X 8 Ranch. The latter he acquired by dubious means from old Stephen Stinson, owner of the Slash S. He also holds a mortgage against the Slash S, and it appears that Stinson will be unable to pay it when due.

Stinson has practically given up the fight, and gotten rid of all Slash S help save Sleepy Hatch, the cook; but his daughter Teddy is still carrying on. The two waddies, acting upon the advice of Kellicut, decide to offer their services to the Slash S.

They arrive at the ranch house and, after some hesitation, Teddy Stinson accepts the offer of the two punchers. That night, three of Blackwood's Bar X 8 men attempt to "get" Tuscon and Stony. The new Slash S men account for two of the raiders, and the third escapes.

The next day Tuscon boldly sets out alone for the Bar X 8, carrying the bodies of the ambushers. Upon his arrival he pretends to have accepted an offer of Blackwood's to join him, and gains in part the confidence of the men—especially that of Yank Healy. Healy, he later learns, has been forced to join Blackwood against his will, because of a past killing of which Blackwood has knowledge.

But when Blackwood returns to the ranch, he succeeds in catching Tuscon off guard, and disarms him. The cowboy is saved by the timely arrival of Stony Brooke. Later, Marshal Laramie Lyons walks in—but he is disarmed, and the two waddies make their escape.

Tuscon then makes further plans to thwart Blackwood, who expects to be elected sheriff in the coming election, thus cinching his control of the county. Tuscon persuades Terry Kellicut to oppose the Bar X 8 owner. In the meantime, Blackwood has hired four more gunmen from across the Border.

Disguised as a peon, Tuscon takes up residence in the Mexican Quarter of Cuarta City, and succeeds in swinging the Mexican vote — hitherto negligible — to Kellicut. And while Tuscon and Stony hold the Bar X 8 killers at the point of the six-gun, Blackwood is defeated—Judge Mandell being forced to give an honest count.

That night Tuscon distributes presents to his Mexican friends. As he is leaving his hut, a gun barrel crashes on his head, and he sinks to the ground.

CHAPTER XVII

KILLER'S TRAIL

MEANWHILE, the time passed rapidly in the Española Palace. Stephen Stinson had been eager to get back to the Slash S and give Teddy the news of the election, knowing she would be pleased, so he and Sleepy Hatch had departed shortly after Tuscon left the place.

Aside from one bartender who had remained to take care of such trade as they gave him, Kellicut, Stony and Kellicut's punchers had the Española Palace to themselves. The punchers—by name, Jim Perrine, Chuck Bolton, Ernie Thorne, Tacks McLain, Greg Lawrence, and Tubbs Kimball—were a young, pleasant-featured lot, extremely well satisfied that their boss had been elected. Consequently, each of them felt called upon to buy a drink to celebrate the occasion. Between drinks there was considerable conversation, and much laughter at the manner in which Tuscon's plan had defeated Hawk Blackwood.

"Reckon I might as well take office right now," Kellicut remarked after a time. "I'm goin' down and ask Judge Mandell to swear me in right away. Mandell won't like it much if I get him out of bed, but I ain't worryin' about that. It's a ten to one shot that he ain't been able to sleep yet. S'long—see you all later."

Stony happened to look at his watch—a large, nickel-plated affair—shortly after Kellicut had passed through the entrance to the street. "Gosh," Stony observed in surprise, "it's 'way after three o'clock already. Tuscon oughta be showin' up right soon."

The men stood talking another three-quarters of an hour. Stony commenced to look worried. "I'd go lookin' for that pard of mine," he commented, "only I don't want him to get an idea that I think he can't take care of himself." His look of concern deepened after another ten minutes of waiting.

"Might be," Greg Lawrence suggested, "that Tuscon and some of his Mex friends have wrapped themselves around a few bottles of *mescal*, or somethin'."

"Might be," Stony agreed moodily, "but I doubt it. I was a fool not to go lookin' for him before. I'm goin', now."

At that minute Terry Kellicut entered the building, wearing a polished star on his vest. "I'm a sure enough sheriff now, fellers," he grinned. "Gosh! Mandell was mad because I got him up. We had to go over to the county house to get my badge. Mandell didn't want to go, but he'll be doin' anythin' I tell him from now on. . . . Ain't Tuscon back yet?"

Stony shook his head. "I'm just leavin' to look for him."

The smile quickly vanished from Terry's face. "I don't like this a-tall," he stated emphatically. Turning a quick glance on the barkeeper he asked, "Do you know what Blackwood's intentions were when he left here, feller?"

The barkeep shook his head. "Not a

thing. Blackwood just hired me yesterday mornin', for the Election Day rush. I don't know much about him. Ain't been in Cuarta City only a coupla days, and I'm pullin' out again just as soon as I'm relieved by the day man. I ain't likin' this town so well—not so long as Blackwood's running it."

Evidently the man was speaking the truth. Kellicut turned back to Stony: "We'll all go with you. Somethin' must be wrong. C'mon."

Gray dawn was lighting the street when the men stepped out of the Española Palace. Horses were quickly procured at various hitch-racks along the way, and the men started in the direction of the Mexican Quarter, Stony riding double with one of the Box TK men.

Finding the Mexican Quarter all quiet when they arrived, the men knew at once that something had happened to Tuscon. A moment later Stony spied his horse, still patiently waiting for the missing cowboy. "There's my horse now," Stony said. "Tuscon wouldn't go away of his own accord, and leave it there."

Several of the nearby houses were aroused and their occupants questioned. No, they hadn't seen the Americano. Perhaps he was sleeping in his house. As Stony had more than half expected, he found Tuscon's former dwelling deserted. His fears mounted, especially when one of the Box TK men found what he thought were the signs of a brief struggle before the doorway.

"See," Tacks McLain pointed out. "The dirt is scuffed up there. Now, look over here." He paused a minute, frowned, then, "Looks like two hombres had lifted a third between 'em. You can see the marks where a body was lyin'."

"Somebody's put somethin' over on Tuscon and carried him away!" Stony cried. His face grew grim. "I'm bettin' that *somebody* was Hawk Blackwood and his dirty gang. I'm headin' for the Bar X 8! Anybody with me?"

"We're all goin' with you, cowboy," Kellicut nodded. His voice was quiet, but a look of cold determination had settled over his features. "If Hawk Blackwood has hurt Tuscon, God help him!" He considered a moment, then, "I don't reckon we better go to the Bar X 8," he advised shrewdly. "If Blackwood has pulled any dirty work, he knows we'd go there first, so he'd stay away. Right now, he's hatin' me like poison, so I wouldn't be surprised none if he'd gone to my place and raised some hell!"

His face paled a trifle. "Jeff Ringo and the cook stayed. Mebbe they're puttin' up a battle, this minute! I reckon we better get movin'. If things is okay at the Box TK, we can head toward the Bar X 8 next. So long as Blackwood ain't killed Tuscon outright, he's holdin' him for some deviltry. C'mon, get movin', men!"

Two hours steady riding brought the punchers, headed by Kellicut and Stony, in sight of the Box TK—or what remained of it! It was by now broad daylight, and Kellicut's worst fears were confirmed before they reached the place. Even from a distance he could see smoldering lines of smoke rising from the spot at which his buildings had once stood.

"The sneakin' coyotes!" Terry cried. "They've burned my place!" For the moment the men drew rein and stared in dismay across the range to the spot they had once called home.

Stony reined his horse close to Kellicut's. "It's too damn bad, Terry," he said sympathetically.

Kellicut shook his head impatiently. "It ain't them old wooden buildin's I'm worried about. I'm insured. I'm thinkin' of Jeff Ringo and old Zach Lincoln, my cook!"

"Good God!" Stony ejaculated. "Let's hope that they've only been took prisoner, along with Tuscon."

The men didn't wait to talk further, but spurred toward the ruined buildings, their faces frozen with mingled sorrow and anger.

It was a sorry scene that met their eyes when they arrived. Of the buildings, only the walls of the bunkhouse, which had been of adobe construction, still survived, and its rafters and cross-beams were entirely gone. Scattered about the ground lay smoking debris. Here and there were pieces of timber still flaming.

"Prob'ly doused everythin' with oil," Kellicut commented, grim-faced. "I kept a supply for the lamps, down in the barn." He continued to search the ruins for the forms of his two men, hoping against hope that he wouldn't find them.

At last the charred bodies of Jeff Ringo and Zach Lincoln were discovered beneath a heap of smoking embers. So far as Kellicut could determine Ringo had been shot through the back of the head; Lincoln had several bullet holes in his body!

"Damn Blackwood for a measly skunk!" Kellicut declared vehemently. "Jeff and Zach was prob'ly took by surprise while they was waitin' up to hear about the election! Boys, we gotta get the snakes that did this, pronto! Zach and Jeff can be buried later."

There was no answer, but the white-faced group of men moved quickly to their horses, some of them brushing tears from their eyes. All of the punchers were tight-lipped, eager to ride and avenge their comrades' deaths.

As though struck by a new thought, Kellicut glanced toward a corral, some distance from the burned ruins. The corral was untouched by fire, but empty. The gate stood wide open. "I had thirty head of good horseflesh in that corral," Killicut stated grimly. "The dirty buzzards took them, too, figurin' they'd stop us from makin' a change of ponies. Well, if they gotta herd horses along the way, mebbe they'll be easier to catch. C'mon fellers, rattle your hocks!"

The next moment Kellicut and Stony, followed by six stern-faced cowboys, swept off on the killer's trail. The marks of horses' hoofs leading from the corral showed plainly the route taken by the murdering raiders.

They had hardly swung into a swift, distance-covering gallop, before a narrow-eyed Mexican vaquero got to his feet from behind a rise of ground half a mile away, where he had been keeping watch, hurriedly mounted and dashed off to give the news to his chief. . . .

Kellicut and his punchers rode furiously until noon without catching sight of the men they sought. Finally they stopped to rest and water their horses at a small stream, while Kellicut closely scrutinized the trail. It was difficult to tell from the "sign" just how many men were in the band they were pursuing. Some of Kellicut's stolen horses were shod, some were not, and the hoofprints of these were mingled with those of the killers' mounts.

" 'Bout all I can make out," Kellicut observed, rising to his feet, "is that they're sure pushin' hard. Runnin' at top speed every minute. Well, let's get goin', we may have some luck and spot 'em before long."

Here it was all rolling country, and a man could never tell what might be found beyond the crest of the next hill. The punchers remounted. It was now that Stony reined his horse close to Kellicut's.

"Say, Terry," he asked half-apologetically, "would you mind if I turned back? I got a hunch that the gang we're chasing ain't carryin' Tuscon with 'em. I can't explain it, but I got a feelin' that I'm gettin' farther from Tuscon every minute."

Kellicut's face showed plainly that he thought the cowboy was wrong, but he didn't put his opinion into words. After all, there was a bare possibility that Stony was right in his surmise.

"Sure, cowboy," Kellicut answered heartily, "you do what you think is best. Me'n' my boys will carry on, until somethin' breaks. I'm hopin' you luck."

Stony turned in the saddle to face the other men. "You won't be mindin', either, will you, fellers?" he queried.

"Shucks! no, Stony," Jim Perrine replied warmly. "We know how you feel about that fightin' pardner of yours. If you've got a hunch, follow it."

"It's all right with us, cowpuncher," Tubbs Kimball put in.

The other cowboys voiced similar remarks. A moment later Stony turned his horse back toward the way from which they had come. "Adios and good luck," he called over his shoulder.

Had Terry and his men known of Tuscon's position at that moment, they, too, might have turned back, but all of the Box TK men felt certain that Hawk Blackwood and his gang rode ahead, on the trail they were following. As a matter of fact, it was Blackwood's Mexican vaqueros who had raided the Box TK, acting under the instructions, of course, of their chief. Blackwood and his white henchmen had stayed behind to capture Tuscon. The raid on the Box TK had been made to draw Kellicut and his men out of the vicinity, and to their death!

It was three in the afternoon before the Box TK punchers caught up with the men they were seeking. Terry and his riders had just topped a high, grassy ridge, and pulled rein to scrutinize the surrounding country. Before them lay a long, gradual slope, with, at the bottom of the slope, a half mile away, a clump of cottonwood trees.

Just at the edge of the cottonwoods, Kellicut caught sight of a bunch of horses, standing droop-headed and straddle-legged, as though weary to the point of exhaustion. Of the men herding them there was nothing to be seen, but doubtless the raiders were resting in the shade of the trees.

At that instant there came a faint yell of alarm from down the slope. Kellicut and his men had been seen! A minute later six riders dashed out from the sheltering trees and started at breakneck speed across the range, leaving behind them the stolen horses.

The Box TK men hesitated just an instant. "That ain't Blackwood, or Laramie, or any of them gunfighters," Ernie Thorne cried.

"No, we've been outguessed," Kellicut exclaimed bitterly. "Judgin' from their Mex hats, I'd say they was that bunch of vaqueros Blackwood has workin' for him. I clean forgot about them—didn't think they ever did anythin' but punch cows. I reckon Stony was right, after all, boys." His eyes narrowed. "Howsomever, them's the snakes that killed Jeff and Zach. We might as well finish them, now. C'mon!"

With a rousing yell the men swept down the hillside, and commenced to gain at once! Doubtless the Mexicans would have been farther ahead, but before burning the Box TK ranch house, they had stolen three bottles of Terry's prime Bourbon. After making off with the horses they had pushed on at a rapid gait, until the clump of cottonwoods was reached.

Here they had decided it was time to have a drink. In fact, they had had several drinks, and lost their ambition for fast traveling. It wasn't until one of the more sober of them sighted Terry and the punchers, that they again felt the urge to move on. They suddenly remembered, now, that Blackwood had given strict orders to ambush and wipe out all who might follow them. But it was too late for an ambush. Here they were, out in the open, with seven avenging Americanos riding hell-bent-for-election on their heels.

The cowpunchers had the better horses. A Mexican never treats his mount well enough to get the best it can give. The Box TK men were rapidly overtaking the vaqueros, by this time. Filled with the false courage instilled by Terry's Bourbon, the Mexicans abruptly decided to stay and show these *malo* gringos a thing or two about fighting!

Wheeling their horses suddenly, the vaqueros charged back toward the Box TK riders! This was more to Terry's liking. Already one of his man had unlimbered a volley of flying lead at the approaching Mexicans!

Guns commenced to crack like mad as the two factions rode closer together. A horse went down, screaming and kicking, sending its Mexican rider sprawling on the ground! Before he could rise, Greg Lawrence rode close, leaned low from the saddle, and sent a leaden slug ripping through the Mexican's heart!

Dust rose in clouds, almost obscuring the riders from sight. While Jim Perrine was pursuing one vaquero, another rode close behind, fired his gun almost directly against Jim's side. Perrine threw up his hands and pitched from the saddle! As his killer turned, a fiendish look of hate on his swarthy features, he was met, face to face, by Chuck Bolton. Twice the Mexican fired . . . missed. Chuck spurred closer. His gun flamed with the Mexican's. It was the Mexican who dropped from the saddle, though!

With the thoughts of their murdered comrades in their hearts, the cowboys fought like wild men, bent solely on avenging the two deaths. Finally, there were but two Mexicans left in the saddle. These two quickly dropped to the ground, and commenced to beg for mercy. But it was too late to ask for mercy, now. Before the words left their mouths, leaden slugs had put an end to their evil existences!

Kellicut reined in his horse, wearily beckoned to his men. "It's over, boys," he stated grimly. "Dead killers is good killers! We're lucky six of us is left. I reckon Jim Perrine is finished."

The men dismounted and went to the side of their fallen pardner. No doubt about it; he was already gone, but on his face was the fighting smile of a man who has squared things for a comrade.

"Check up on the Mex bodies," Kellicut ordered. "I'll put Jim across the saddle of his horse. See if any of them greasers has got a chance to live. Under the circumstances, I don't feel like takin' no prisoners!"

The cowboys quickly moved to do his bidding. All but one of the Mexicans were dead. This sole survivor of the raiding vaqueros was going fast, and had but a few minutes to survive. Before he died he confessed that they were working under the orders of Hawk Blackwood. A minute later a shudder ran through his frame and his head fell back.

By this time Terry had lifted the body of Jim Perrine to the saddle and tied it securely in place. The men gathered around for further orders.

"We didn't get much outa the one Mex that lived long enough to talk," Chuck Bolton said. "He admitted that they was workin' under orders from Hawk Blackwood, but didn't know anythin' about Tuscon. I reckon Blackwood don't tell any of his men no more than is necessary. What's next, Terry?"

"We'll be slopin' back. Until I can rebuild, I guess Stephen Stinson will let us stay at his place." He ran a rapid eye over his fighting cowpunchers. Three of them had been slightly wounded in the fight: Ernie Thorne's right arm was bleeding a trifle, Greg Lawrence had a nasty red furrow across the knuckles of one hand, and Tubbs Kimball had a flesh wound in his left thigh.

"You fellers that's been hit," Terry resumed, "will be comin' with me. Better wrap bandannas around them scratches, until we can get a chance to tie 'em proper. Chuck Bolton and Tacks McLain can round up my horse stock and bring them over to the Slash S. The rest of us will take Perrine's body back to the Box TK range and give it a decent burial. We better all be movin' pronto. I'm anxious to locate Stony again, and see if he's heard anythin' from Tuscon."

Ten minutes later the Box TK men were again in saddles and calling farewells to Bolton and McLain, who were already busy rounding up the stolen horses. This didn't prove to be a very difficult task. The Mexicans had pushed the animals so hard that they offered little resistance to being herded together, and were headed back before Kellicut and the three punchers, with the dead body of Perrine, had disappeared over the first rise of land.

CHAPTER XVIII

Tuscon Gets a Gun

TUSCON had recovered consciousness slowly. First one arm moved, then a leg. Next, his eyelids fluttered open. He moved his head slightly; it ached terrifically. Dimly, through a haze of bewildered emotions, he commenced to make out his surroundings. He was stretched on the hard dirt floor of a small adobe hut, very similar to the one he had occupied in the Mexican Quarter. But this wasn't the Mexican Quarter. It was daylight, afternoon in fact, and there wasn't a sound to be heard. There was no furniture in the place. At one end of the hut was a solid oaken door; in the other, a window, equipped with heavy wooden bars.

Tuscon got to his feet, nearly fainting away at the sudden pain that darted through his head. "H'm-m," he muttered dazedly. "Looks like a jail. Gosh! I musta been awful drunk—don't remember puttin' on no drinkin' bout, neither. Wonder where Stony is?"

His hand moved to hip, only to discover that belt and holstered gun were missing. Next he found that his pockets were empty. "Stripped me of every cent, damn 'em! Guess I didn't have much anyhow, after payin' off the greasers for their votes—them I didn't have presents for—"

He stopped suddenly, as memory returned with a rush. One hand strayed gingerly to the back of his head. His fingers encountered a lump the size of a pigeon's egg; the hair was matted with dried blood. "Hell!" Tuscon exploded. "Now I know what happened. Somebody hit me a tunk on the conk. This headache ain't from bein' drunk a-tall. Betcha this is some of Blackwood's work. I knew I shoulda plugged him when I had a chance in the Española."

He crossed the room to the door, tried it. It was locked. "Hey! Anybody out there?" Tuscon called.

Instantly there came a reply in a familiar voice: "I'll be right in, feller." Tuscon couldn't place the voice at once, though.

A key grated in the lock, the door swung back, and Yank Healy entered, gun in hand. "You finally come to, huh?" Healy greeted. "I was afraid for a while that Lyons had fractured your skull, or somethin'—Keep back, feller!" as Tuscon suddenly started forward.

Tuscon relaxed again, forced a grin. "All right, Healy. I'll behave. What's the idea of this, anyway? What time is it? Got a drink of water?"

For reply Healy held out a partly filled canteen. "Drink up, feller. You're welcome to what there is. It's around four o'clock, I reckon. Day after the election. Anythin' else you want to know?"

Tuscon emptied the canteen and felt a trifle better. Taking a seat on the floor, he reached for tobacco and cigarettes. His "makin's," too, were gone. Healy noted the motion and tossed his own Durham and brown papers across the floor. Tuscon rolled a cigarette, Healy furnished a match, and a second later the cowboy was fanning his lungs with the welcome smoke. "Well, what's it all about, Healy?" he asked at last.

"I can't tell you much," Yank replied. "I didn't get into town for the election, you know, so I wasn't there when they downed you. That beatin' Brute Kenyon give me busted a few ribs. Hurt me inside some way, too. I'm just commencin' to get around. Hawk was sore as the devil over losin' the election. How come it turned out thataway?"

Tuscon told the story briefly. A faint smile struggled to Healy's face when the cowboy had finished.

"You sure fooled 'em complete, Smith. Between you'n' me I'm glad to hear it. Ghost McCoy and Gunsight Ferguson showed up at the Bar X 8 first, with some orders for Blackwood's vaqueros. The Mexicans saddled up immediate, and hit leather. McCoy and Ferguson wouldn't tell me where they was goin', nor how Blackwood come to lose the election, though. I'm kinda in Dutch with the outfit, owin' to the fact that Hawk is sore because I didn't prevent the gunplay that day Montan, Stutz and Scully got wiped out."

"That's something you couldn't help," Tuscon smiled.

"I can't make Hawk believe it, though. . . . Anyway, a short time after the vaqueros lit out—on some deviltry, I suspect—Hawk, Behr and Lyons come ridin' in, leadin' a horse with you on its back. Behr's shoulder was bandaged, and I heard, then, that Sonora Pierce and Quirt Roberts had been killed. Howsomever, they've all been too sore, ever since, to give me any details. It musta been about seven o'clock this mornin' that they brought you down here, and left me to stand guard—"

"Where's 'down here'?" Tuscon wanted to know.

"This hut used to be a sort of line camp in the old days when Stephen Stinson owned the Bar X 8—before Hawk changed the brand. I reckon Stinson made use of it them days when the Apaches were hittin' the warpath."

"This hut is on Bar X 8 property, eh?"

Healy nodded. "We're about fifteen

miles south of the Bar X 8 ranch buildin's, just at the edge of the foothills of the Escobalto Mountains. There's quite a bit of timber around here, but it ain't only a short distance to the desert. I reckon most everybody has forgot about this hut. It ain't been used for a long time."

The man seemed willing to talk, so Tuscon put another question to him: "Did Blackwood fake the bill-of-sale that gave him the Bar X 8?"

Healy shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno for sure, Smith, but I always had a hunch that he did. I do know, that a few nights before he got that bill-of-sale, he was practisin' Stinson's signature. He was copying it from a signature on an old letter of Stinson's, which Hawk had picked up in Cuarta City, some place. Course, Hawk always claimed that he won the Bar X 8 in a poker game, and from what I understand, Stephen Stinson was too drunk to know whether he did or not. Ten to one, Stinson was doped instead of drunk. Nobody ever knew the old man to take too much before. Now, Hawk holds Stinson's note on the Slash S. I suppose he'll have that outfit, too, before long."

"Not if I can stop him, he won't," Tuscon returned emphatically.

"Maybe you won't be able to stop him. Hawk's bad!"

"He ain't as bad as he thinks he is," Tuscon scowled, "and he's sure to get licked before we're finished with him. Healy, why don't you bust loose from his dirty gang?"

"Gosh, I would in a minute," Healy returned bitterly, "but Hawk has got somethin' on me. I shot a feller once, in self-defense. Hawk was the only witness to the affair, but he refused to tell how the killin' occurred. There was nothin' for me to do but light out. I been with Hawk ever since, and he's made me do a lot of things that ain't to my taste. Howsomever, Hawk threatens to tell everythin' to my wife and kid livin' up in Colorado. I'd do anythin' to keep them from knowin' what a coyote I turned out to be. I send 'em money every so often, and they think I'm earnin' an honest livin'."

He paused a moment, then went on, "I was figurin' to break away, though, when they brought you here; but Hawk knows I'm sick of his game, and don't trust me none. They only just let me have a gun, to keep an eye on you. Hawk wouldn't leave me a horse. So they's no use of me tryin' to get away. In my condition I couldn't walk more'n half a mile." He spat a stream of saliva, tinged with crimson. "See that? I'm bleedin' inside, some place. That's Brute Kenyon's work. I'm glad your pard give him a beatin'. Kenyon's disappeared, by the way. I think Hawk musta laid him out cold."

Tuscon noticed, now, that Yank Healy's face was pale and drawn, and the man was evidently not very strong. He commenced to wonder if he couldn't take Healy by surprise, and wrest the gun from his hand. "What's Hawk figurin' to do with me?" Tuscon asked carelessly, after a minute.

"You got me," Healy replied. "He brought you here, figurin' to hold you captive, until Kellicut consented to resign from the office of sheriff. Howsomever, Lyons talked Hawk outa that idea—said he didn't think it would work out right. After that, him and Hawk talked over some plan I couldn't hear. Finally both of 'em commenced to laugh. They got somethin' devilish in mind, I'm bettin'. Anyway, you'll know pretty soon, because when you called me, I'd just seen Hawk and the others ridin' through the trees. They oughta arrive any minute."

Even as he spoke, there came from outside the hut, the creaking of saddle leather. Tuscon rose slowly to his feet, then with a sudden leap, cleared the intervening yards that separated him from Healy, seized the man's right wrist in a vicelike grip!

Healy struggled to break loose, but it was of no avail. "Give me that gun, Yank!" Tuscon ordered, as the two struggled about the room.

"Can't—do—it, Smith," Healy panted. "Like to, though, but it—would be—worth—my life. Hawk would shoot me—"

But the sentence was never finished. With a strong push, Tuscon sent the man reeling to one side, seized the gun from his grasp. Healy collapsed in a huddled heap, as Tuscon whirled to face the door!

The next instant the door was flung open, and Hawk Blackwood entered. He stopped short, his eyes widening, as he took in the scene before him.

"Stick 'em up, Hawk!" Tuscon barked. "I'm fightin' my way outa here, plenty pronto!"

Hawk's hands went into the air. "Where'd you get that gun?" he demanded in surly tones.

"Took it off'n Healy," Tuscon snapped. "You mighta knowed—"

Blackwood's lips curled back in a wolf-like grin of triumph. His hands came down, one of them going to holster!

Tuscon pulled trigger! The hammer fell with a dead click! A second time he tried, and again the gun failed to explode!

"Better give up, Smith," Blackwood sneered. "That gun is useless! I drew the charges from the ca'tridges, before I let Yank have it—just give it to him to run a bluff, in case you did wake up. Now, cut out that foolishness, or I'll plug you."

By this time, McCoy, Gunsight Ferguson, and Lyons had crowded into the room, at Blackwood's heels. Behind them stood Grizzly Behr, with his right shoulder swathed in bandages, and one of the Mexican vaqueros from the Bar X 8.

Tuscon dropped his arms to his sides, a grim smile on his face. "Sorry I handled you so rough, Yank," he spoke over his shoulder to Healy, who was just rising from the floor. "Wouldn't have done it, if I'd knowed your gun wa'n't loaded."

"Didn't know it myself," Healy panted.

"Hell, no!" Hawk guffawed. "Do you think I'd trust Yank with a loaded gun when I wa'n't around to watch him. He might light out on me. Even at that I wouldn't have left him alone if I'd knowed you was goin' to come awake so soon, Smith. Well, things is kinda changed around, ain't they?"

"Not much," Tuscon responded easily. "Mebbe you've took a pot, Hawk, but the game ain't over yet. I got plenty of chips to play, before anybody calls for the last hand."

"As far as you're concerned," Blackwood snarled, "the last hand is due to be called *muy pronto!*"

Tuscon shook his head. "It can't be done, Blackwood—not with nothin' more than your dirty deuces to back you up. I'm figurin' to draw an' ace-high flush before long—"

"Countin' on your pardner to come and get you out of this, eh?" Hawk laughed nastily.

"Mebbe."

"You can give up that thought, right now," Hawk jeered. "While Kellicut was lookin' around Cuarta City for you last night and early this mornin', after Laramie whanged you on the head, I sent McCoy and Ferguson out to the Bar X 8 with instructions to my vaqueros. By this time the vaqueros have burned down all the Box TK buildings—"

"You're a liar!" Tuscon spoke contemptuously.

"By Gawd! I'm givin' it to you straight," Blackwood insisted. "You can ask Diego, here. I had him hang around to see what happened." He turned to the vaquero: "Diego, wa'n't all of Kellicut's buildin's burned out, and didn't Kellicut and his punchers, with Stony Brooke ridin' with 'em, take after some horses that my vaqueros picked up?"

The Mexican nodded. "Si, Señor Blackwood," he answered.

Blackwood laughed confidently, turned back to Tuscon: "My men will lead Kellicut and Stony and the rest of punchers into ambush and wipe them out. That'll pretty much finish the Box TK, because I reckon by this time the cook and foreman is done for. Nope, Smith, you're plumb finished, right now. Things has commenced to come my way!"

Tuscon's heart dropped a trifle, but he only laughed coolly. "You've gone too far, Blackwood," he stated. "You can't get away with anythin' like that. Somebody's bound to buck your game."

"By the time I get through with folks around here," Blackwood announced evilly, "they won't be nobody left to buck my game! I got my mind made up to run this part of the cow country, if I have to kill off every damn feller that don't see things my way. What do you think of that, my fightin' buckaroo!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE DEATH MACHINE

FOR a moment the two men stood glaring at each other, neither making the slightest move. Then Tuscon got into action: "Here's what I think of it," he exclaimed. He was still holding Yank Healy's empty gun, and now he raised it, and sent the weapon hurtling straight for Blackwood's hate-contorted face!

Blackwood saw the move coming, ducked hastily! The flying gun passed over Hawk's head and crashed squarely against the nose of Laramie Lyons who stood immediately behind his chief. Lyons staggered back, lost his balance and went down as though a ton of adobe bricks had struck him! At the same instant Tuscon leaped forward, and, as Blackwood straightened up, the cowboy's clenched fist drove into Blackwood's face. Blackwood sat abruptly down on Laramie's prone body!

Tuscon had no time to do more. Ghost McCoy was already on top of him. Tuscon felt a gun barrel jammed against his side . . . heard McCoy's cold tones: "That's enough, feller. You're gone, if you make another move!"

Had Tuscon known what was to come later, he would have battled on to the end. Instead, feeling McCoy's muzzle jabbed into his body, he suddenly subsided, and stepped back. Blackwood and Laramie Lyons rose slowly to their feet. Both had bloody noses, and both were cursing at a tremendous rate.

"Damn if you two ain't plumb fluent," Tuscon laughed tauntingly. "I never in all my life heard words strung together in such a long stream. You don't have to repeat yourself none, neither, do you? Tell you what, Blackwood: Why don't you and Laramie enter the cussin' contest at the next county fair. You'd win hands down!"

"You got yours comin', Smith," Blackwood mumbled through rapidly swelling lips. "What I'm goin' to do to you will be a warnin' to the rest of the country not to monkey with Hawk Blackwood!"

"Huh! Hawk Blackwood, bah!" Tuscon jeered. "What do you mean, *Hawk? Buzzard,* it should be! A buzzard with the spirit of a canary!"

Blackwood's face reddened. "Damn you!" he cried, yanking out his gun. "I've stood enough—"

Laramie Lyons, the cooler of the two, leaped forward and knocked up his chief's arm, as a bullet went thundering into the ceiling above Tuscon's head. "Wait, Hawk!" Laramie yelled. "Cool down! You'll spoil everythin' if you kill him thisaway. Have you forgot?"

Blackwood suddenly relaxed, muttering sullenly. "No, I ain't forgot," he growled. "We'll get busy right away. String him up, boys!"

There came a sudden rush from the others to seize Tuscon. The cowboy fought as well as he could, but no food had passed his lips since the previous day, and the wallop he had received on the head had weakened him considerably. In a short time, despite his flying fists, he was overcome and carried to the barred window at the back of the hut. Here his wrists were tied to the bars above his head.

Next, the vaquero known as Diego procured some wooden stakes which were driven into the dirt floor on either side of Tuscon's feet. Tuscon commenced to get the idea. "Figurin' to spread-eagle me, eh?" he panted.

"You got the idea, Smith," Blackwood growled. "Hurry up, boys."

Diego and Lyons quickly spread his legs, fastened the ankles with rope to the stakes driven into the ground. By the time they had finished, Tuscon's body was stretched so tightly, he could scarcely move a muscle!

"How long you figurin' to leave me this way?" Tuscon demanded coolly.

"Until you're plumb finished," Blackwood snarled. He turned to Grizzly Behr, who stood at one side, evidently enjoying the scene, "Behr, your shoulder ain't damaged so bad but what you can't bring in that gun. Make it snappy, now."

Behr left the hut. Tuscon could hear him moving around outside. In a few moments he returned, carrying a pair of wooden boxes which had been nailed together, one on top of the other. These he set down on the floor, about seven yards distant from the cowboy. The top of the highest box was just on a level with a spot about six inches above Tuscon's waist, and firmly secured to it, with blocks of wood and nailed strips of tin, was a Colt forty-five that pointed directly at Tuscon's heart!

Tuscon watched the proceedings with growing trepidation, but outwardly he was cooler than the proverbial cucumber. "I can remember one Fourth of July, when I was a kid," he said easily, "makin' somethin' like that. I got one of my dad's guns, and fixed it up that same way, pretendin' like it was a cannon. Course, it was only a kid's stunt. You been gettin' childish again, Blackwood?"

"You'll find out if this is a kid's stunt," Blackwood growled. He swept the others aside, saying, "I want the satisfaction of fixin' this, hombres."

Tuscon watched Blackwood in silence, as the man loaded and cocked the gun. Next, Blackwood procured a thin lacing of wet rawhide, with a loop on one end. Working carefully and slowly, the fiend slipped the loop about the trigger, held his thumb between hammer and cartridge, while he pulled the loop tight. The thumb was to prevent any premature explosion of the gun.

"This is a damn ticklish job," Blackwood observed, grinning nastily. "I ain't honin' for this hawg-laig to go off too soon."

With one loop drawn about the trigger, Blackwood took the other end of the rawhide strip and fastened it securely through a staple driven into the back of the box. To accomplish this, he was forced to remove his thumb from the hammer, but Laramie Lyons' thumb served fully as well, until the job was completed. Finally, the two stood back and surveyed their work in admiration. Now, although the strip of rawhide hadn't been pulled taut, it would require but little tightening to make it so. After that, the slightest tension would pull the trigger and release the Colt hammer on a death-dealing cartridge!

"Well, how do you like our little idea, Smith?" Blackwood jeered, when he had finished.

Tuscon was pale, but composed. "About what I'd expect of you snakes," he declared calmly.

"You give us credit for brains, then, eh?" Blackwood said coldly. "I suppose you know, Smith, that wet rawhide stretches like the devil. On the other hand it shrinks when it dries! We sure soaked that rawhide plenty, so it'll take a long time to dry. You can be watchin' it, waitin' for the gun to go off, and thinkin' how sorry you are that you ever decided to buck Hawk Blackwood!"

"That's somethin' I won't never be sorry for, Blackwood," the cowboy retorted. "An' I ain't dead, yet, by a long shot."

"You will be, before many hours. You got a nice time ahead of you, watching that rawhide dry and tighten. Finally it will get tight enough, then, wow! It pulls the trigger, and Tuscon Smith goes plumb to hell!"

Tuscon nodded. "A nice little stunt, Blackwood. Some day I'll square this account with you, and it won't be to your likin'." He was thinking even then that perhaps the trigger might work stiffly enough to resist the pull of the shrinking rawhide. Surely, Stony would locate him eventually.

Evidently, Blackwood guessed what was passing through Tuscon's mind for he said. "It won't take but the least bit of pressure to release that hammer, Smith. We took the gun apart and worked on the mechanism. That six-gun is at hair-trigger tension, right now! So there ain't no chance of my scheme missin' fire!"

"C'mon, Hawk," Laramie Lyons interposed. "Everything's okay. We might just as well be slopin', an' leave Smith to his thoughts—"

"Damn it all!" Yank Healy broke in. "I ain't standin' for nothin' like this, Hawk. It's plain murder and worse—"

Hawk whirled savagely on his man.

"What you goin' to do about it, Healy," he demanded savagely. "I'm runnin' this game. You keep your mouth shut, or I'll do some talkin' you don't want me to do!"

Healy suddenly shrank back. "All right, Hawk," he said hastily. "I'm not sayin' a word—"

"You keep outa this, Healy," Tuscon broke in. "I'm appreciatin' your sentiments, but you can't help me none by gettin' yourself killed."

Again Hawk's thin lips lengthened in a cold, snaky smile. "I forgot to tell you, before, Smith," he stated, "that I split the end of that bullet. It'll expand just fine when it hits, and will make a lot bigger hole goin' out your back, than it will goin' in your middle!"

He couldn't resist gloating over his victim a few minutes longer, stooping behind the gun, squinting along the barrel. "Yep," he added with satisfaction, "that slug oughta tear part of your heart plumb away!"

"C'mon," Lyons urged. "Let's get back to the ranch and see if anythin's been heard from the vaqueros. We don't want to hang around here all day. You can return to-morrow, and see how nice the stunt worked, Hawk."

Blackwood rose to his feet. "All right, I'm comin'. Get goin', boys. Healy, I brought your horse back with us. Go out an' get on—and remember I'm watchin' you close every minute. I ain't trustin' nobody what has sympathy for fellers that butt in on my game!"

The men filed quickly from the hut. Blackwood paused just a moment more. His glance traveled from Tuscon, spread-eagled against the back wall, to his diabolical invention, then back to Tuscon again.

"A pleasant journey to hell, Smith," he sneered, eyes dropping before Tuscon's steady gaze.

"I'm bettin' you'll get there first," Tuscon retorted.

"Bah!" Blackwood snapped angrily, enraged because he had been unable to shake the cowboy's nerve. He wheeled about and stamped outside, slamming the door behind him.

A minute later Tuscon heard men climbing into saddles, some conversation, then the noise of horse's hoofs on loose pieces of rock. Gradually the sounds died away and the cowboy was left to himself, with that round black muzzle pointing directly at his body. . . .

CHAPTER XX

An Unequal Duel

IT was a long, long time before Tuscon forgot the torture of the long hours he passed, gazing into the muzzle of that death-dealing six-shooter, as he stood, spread-eagled, against the wall, powerless to get free. It is one thing to face a gun in the hands of an enemy; it is quite another to be forced to wait, hour after hour, and minute after dragging minute, for a gun to explode, knowing eventually that it will explode, but not knowing the exact instant that death will come. It is the strain of waiting, in a case of this kind, that breaks down a man's nerve.

Gladly would Tuscon have faced a battery of machine guns, could he have had in his right hand the feel of a walnut-butted six-shooter; but to die like this, without a chance of defending himself, was almost more than the cowboy could bear.

For a time after Blackwood and his men had departed, Tuscon became panicky. He struggled to release the cords that bound his wrists to the bars at the window. It did no good; the thongs only cut the deeper into his wrist, already rubbed red and raw. Next, he endeavored to loosen the pegs that held his ankles. No success there, either. The more he fought against his bonds, the tighter they grew, it seemed.

From then on, it required all of the cowboy's iron nerve to keep from going crazy. "You're a danged fool, Tuscon Smith," he muttered to himself, "if you let this get your goat. Somethin' will happen to save you. Are you goin' to show a yellow streak at this stage of the game? Buck up!"

Daylight slowly faded; dusk crept into the torture chamber, lingered but a few moments, then darkness descended. Tuscon sagged on the bonds that held his wrists, rested as much as possible. His head was aching terrifically again, and his tongue was swollen and parched from the lack of water. Occasionally, from outside, came slight noises, caused by small denizens of the night, and each time Tuscon started as though someone had set off a cannon close to his ear. His nerves were getting jumpy, now. . . .

After what seemed ages the moon came up, shone palely through the barred window at the back of his head. For a time, before it got too high, it picked out that round, black muzzle pointing at his body. At first sight of the weapon, in the moonlight, beads of perspiration stood out on the cowboy's forehead. Again he fought to break loose. To his distorted imagination it seemed he could see that rawhide strip tightening . . . ever tightening . . . against the trigger of the gun. . . .

He wondered how dry the rawhide was by this time. . . . Suddenly, he started nervously. A chill ran along his spine causing the hair to bristle at the back of his neck. There, the trigger was slowly moving! An instant more, and savage flame would burst from that round, black muzzle . . . cruel lead would open a gaping wound in his body. . . .

As though hypnotized, Tuscon gazed wildly at the gun, his eyes nearly starting from their sockets. Yes, the trigger was moving . . . now!

A groan was torn from the cowboy's clenched teeth. It was that sound that snapped him back to normal. He straightened up, again. The trigger hadn't moved at all. His imagination had played him false, and it was the moonlight sifting through the branches of a tree outside that had thrown a moving shadow on the weapon, causing it to appear as though the trigger had moved.

Tuscon cursed himself for his dumbness. "Damn it all," he muttered. "Where's my head? That trigger will go with a jerk when it goes. It won't move slow, like I thought it was doin'. Reckon I must be goin' nuts. Hell's bells! I oughta have better nerve than this. I've faced guns before. A man don't never go until his time comes, then there ain't nothin' can prevent his dyin'. If my time has come, there's no use of me fightin' it. If it ain't come, Stony or somebody will get here, before long."

At the thought, a sudden peace settled over Tuscon. Somehow, all fear disappeared from his heart. He no longer thought about the gun, but closed his eyes, sagged on the ropes that held him, and fell into a doze. Time passed more swiftly that way. . . .

The moon rose higher, throwing the machine of death once more into shadow. Tuscon slept. The night passed, false dawn came and also passed. Gray light commenced to creep into the hut, and gradually changed to golden as the morning sun climbed above the horizon.

Tuscon finally opened his eyes, saw that another day had come. He glanced at the gun, eyed it with a careless laugh this time. "Wonder if Blackwood knew it would take this long," he speculated coolly.

Sometime later he heard the crunching of horse's hoofs on the ground outside. Sudden hope filled his breast. "That you, Stony?" he cried through dry lips.

"Tuscon!" All the joy in the world in that single word of greeting.

The next instant the door was flung open and Stony bounded into the room. The cowboy gave one look at Blackwood's fiendish invention, then swiftly raised a booted foot and kicked the contraption on its side. The sudden jar caused the gun to explode with a deafening report, and the bullet tore viciously into the wall at one end of the building! It is problematical how much longer would have elapsed before the rawhide tightened enough to pull the trigger.

"Boy, howdy!" Stony cried. "You sure had one narrow escape, Tuscon." He tried to keep his voice calm, but failed. It was difficult for the two to control their feelings at a time like this, and they resorted to their usual line of badinage:

"You danged old fool!" Tuscon exclaimed affectionately. "Where you been, anyway? A hell of a pal you turned out to be, leavin' me here all night! Can't you never get no place on time?"

Stony was rapidly untying the ropes that held his pardner. "If anybody's a danged fool, it's you!" he retorted. "The minute you get outa my sight you get into trouble. You're more worry to me than you're worth. Honestly, you're worse'n some ten-year-old kid. Always gettin' into jams and expectin' me to get you out!"

"Shucks!" Tuscon laughed. "I was all right. That gun wouldn't have gone off while it was pointin' at me. I had it buffaloed!"

"What do you mean, buffaloed?" Stony demanded sarcastically as he released Tuscon's wrists, then set to work on the ankle ropes.

"Just what I said," Tuscon insisted. "I was usin' my will power to keep it from goin' off. Just provin' the triumph of mind over matter, as the sayin' is."

Stony untied the last rope. "Huh! Mind over matter! That's hooie! The scrapes you get into, in spite of all my watchin' out for you, proves the triumph of matter over mind! How'd you get into this fix, anyhow?"

Tuscon stepped away from the wall. His arms and legs were cramped and numb after the long siege, and for a minute or so he moved with difficulty. Vigorous massaging from Stony's fingers started the blood into circulation, while Tuscon related what had happened, commencing from the time he had received the blow on the head, down in the Mexican Quarter. "And this is just one more thing I've got to square with the Blackwood snakes," he finished. "How come you found me?"

Stony told of the burning of the Box TK and the chase after the raiders.

"Blackwood didn't lie, then," Tuscon interposed grimly. "He told me about that. Did you catch them Mexicans? They was supposed to lead you into a trap and then dry-gulch you."

"I dunno whether Kellicut caught up with 'em or what happened," Stony resumed. "I had a hunch you hadn't been taken that way, so I turned back shortly after noon. I hope Kellicut and his boys didn't run into an ambush."

He looked concerned, then continued after a minute, " 'Course, I didn't know where to look for you. Thought you might have gone to the Slash S, if nothin' had happened, so I stopped there. Naturally, they didn't know nothin'. My horse was pretty well tuckered by the time I got there, and I hadn't been able to make any kind of time. Anyway, I changed horses, and started out again. Rode over to the Bar X 8, ready to sling some lead with Blackwood, if necessary. They wa'n't nobody there when I arrived, so I figured that Blackwood must be with the raiders that burned Kellicut's place—"

"He was here about the time you was at the Bar X 8, I reckon," Tuscon interposed.

Stony nodded: "That's likely. Anyway, I swung back to Cuarta City, where I located Greasy-spoon George, the Bar X 8 cook. He was so drunk that he could hardly stand, but I sobered him up and scared hell out of him with my hawglaig. Finally he talked. Said he thought you was with Blackwood, but wa'n't sure. After a little, he told me about this hut. I reckon Blackwood has used it to kill off hombres before. Anyway, the cook's directions weren't very clear, and I couldn't find the place in the dark. I been ridin' around all night, and just sorta stumbled in here by accident this morning. You know the rest."

"Well, let's get goin'," Tuscon proposed. "Blackwood is li'ble to come back to see if I'm dead, yet, and we'd be plumb outnumbered. Hell! I wish I had a gun—I'd sooner have a bath, though." Tuscon was still in the dirty peon clothing, of course.

"Them togs you got on don't smell so sweet, at that," Stony nodded. "Serves you right for minglin' with greasers. Too bad I returned that extra gun that Terry loaned me to use Election Day night. . . . There's that gun that Blackwood fixed up to kill you. Take that. I got plenty ca'tridges."

"Might take it along for a souvenir," Tuscon grinned. "It'll serve to remind me of a few bad hours I had one time."

But the weapon was pretty securely

fastened to the box. "Wish I had somethin' to pry off this strip of tin that holds it down," Tuscon said. "They've clinched them nails underneath." He tugged futilely at the gun.

"Use my gun barrel to pry it off," Stony suggested. He crossed the floor to Tuscon's side, and the two men tugged and worked at the six-shooter, trying to break it loose. "Danged if Blackwood didn't do a good job of nailin' this gun in place," Stony remarked.

"Blackwood," came a cold, mocking voice from the doorway, "always does a good job at anythin' he attempts! Stick 'em up, hombres!"

The two cowboys whirled to see Blackwood and Laramie Lyons, drawn six-shooters in their hands, facing them from the doorway. Behind were Ghost McCoy, Gunsight Ferguson, Yank Healy and Diego, the Mexican. The men had dismounted some distance from the hut and approached stealthily on foot!

Reluctantly, the two cowboys raised hands above their heads. At a nod from his chief, Gunsight Ferguson stepped forward and disarmed Stony.

"You can put your hands down, now," Blackwood grinned maliciously. "Try to start somethin' an' we'll plug you. Guess it's lucky for me that my cook come back to the ranch and told me that Tuscon's pard was searchin' for him. Course, I kinda figured to come up and hear Tuscon beggin' for mercy, anyway. I knew that gun wa'n't due to go off yet. I had that rawhide pretty wet, so Tuscon would have lots of time to think things over. I'm glad it turned out as it did. Now, I got both of you hombres. . . ."

"If you was figurin' to hear me beg for mercy," Tuscon snapped, "you was plumb mistaken! Your scheme bored me to sleep last night. I don't scare easy, Hawk."

Blackwood's face flamed with rage. "I got a scheme that won't bore you this time, Smith!" he cried furiously. "Take Stony out, men."

Stony fought against leaving his pardner, but he was quickly overcome by McCoy, Ferguson and Diego, and dragged from the hut. To prevent any interference, Laramie Lyons and Blackwood kept Tuscon covered with their guns. Placed as he was, it would have been sure death for Tuscon to do anything but stand still and await the next move.

Three minutes later McCoy called from outside, "All right, Chief. You can bring the other hombre out, now."

With the guns of the two men following his every movement, Tuscon walked out of the hut, wondering what lay in store for himself and Stony. When he reached the outside, he saw that Stony had been securely bound to the trunk of a tall pine tree that grew a short distance from the corner of the hut!

In front of the hut was a large clear space, carpeted sparsely with splintered rock and stunted brush; back of the hut was timber, and still farther to the rear, the peaks of the Escobalto Range reared their jagged heads toward the sky. The hut itself was located in a small hollow, with low hills rising on either side.

Tuscon swung around to face Blackwood. "I don't know what dirty work you got in mind this time, Hawk," he said tensely, "but I'm warnin' you not to try none of your snake stunts on Stony. I'm suggestin' that you set him loose, pronto!"

"Bah!" Blackwood sneered. "All of this talk of what one pardner will do for another is the bunk. When it comes to a show-down a man don't think of nothin' but his own hide. I suppose you'll be tellin' me next that you'd be willin' to die if you could save Stony."

"I reckon I would," Tuscon admitted quietly.

Blackwood laughed nastily. "I'm goin' to give you a chance to prove that, Smith." He explained further: "You see, Ghost McCoy thinks that he's a lot faster shot than you are—"

"Got plenty of notches on my walnut to prove it," McCoy broke in.

Blackwood nodded, and then continued. "Anyway, Smith, McCoy is so sure that he's faster'n you that he's asked me to let him fight you a duel. We'll give you your own gun—"

"You will?" Tuscon broke in eagerly.

"I'm darin' you to do just that, Hawk."

"—But," Blackwood continued," there'll only be *one cartridge in it!* If you don't get McCoy with the first shot, you're finished, because McCoy will have his cylinder full! He won't use but one gun, 'cause he figgers that's enough to down you, so long as you'll only have one ca'tridge. You game to take a chance on a duel like that?"

Tuscon nodded eagerly. "One ca'tridge is all I ever waste on snakes," he snapped. "Gimme my gun."

"Just a minute." Blackwood smiled slyly. "You ain't heard all of the conditions yet. . . . You see, Ferguson kinda feels that he's got a grudge against you hombres, so he's takin' a hand, too. While you're crossin' guns with McCoy, Ferguson will have his smoke-rod trained on Stony! If McCoy downs you, I'm givin' my word to untie Stony and let him go free—"

"I wouldn't count on your words," Tusson said coldly.

"Well, that's a chance you'll have to take," Blackwood sneered.

Tuscon nodded. "Suppose I down McCoy, which I'm certain to do?" he asked.

"In that case," and Blackwood's lips opened in a wide smile that exposed his yellow fangs, "Ferguson throws an ounce of lead through your pardner! How do you like it, eh, Smith?"

Tuscon's face flamed with righteous anger. It was all clear, now. The fiends were testing his affection for Stony. Only two courses lay before Tuscon: either he could beat McCoy to the draw, which would result in the helpless Stony's death from Ferguson's murderous bullet; or Tuscon could let McCoy have first shot, and, in accepting death from that first shot, save his pardner, for the time being, from Ferguson's gun!

Tuscon's face went white. For a moment his voice wouldn't come. "Gimme two ca'tridges—just two, Blackwood," he pleaded. "If you're a man you'll give us that much of a show."

"One is all you get." Blackwood laughed, as though at some huge joke. "I guess they won't be no doubt, now, about how much you care for your pardner. I'm bettin' everythin' I own that you'll do your best to down McCoy and save your own skin. You'll be forgettin' all about Stony Brooke when the time comes to choose between your life, or his."

"Never mind me, Tuscon," Stony cried. "Take your gun and get one of these snakes, anyway."

Tuscon nodded, and again turned to Blackwood. "Let's get this straight," he said, holding his voice as steady as possible. "If I let McCoy down me, you'll free Stony. On the other hand, if I down McCoy, Ferguson throws lead through Stony, without givin' him no chance. In that case, what happens to me?"

"We ain't decided that yet," Blackwood replied. "We just want to see if you're game to die to save your pardner. Do you accept the rules of this duel McCoy and me is offerin' you, or ain't you got nerve enough?"

Tuscon considered a minute. Given two bullets in his gun he might stand some show, but he was to have only one. Finally he nodded his head. "Give me my smoke-rod," he said quietly. "I'm aimin' to do my best."

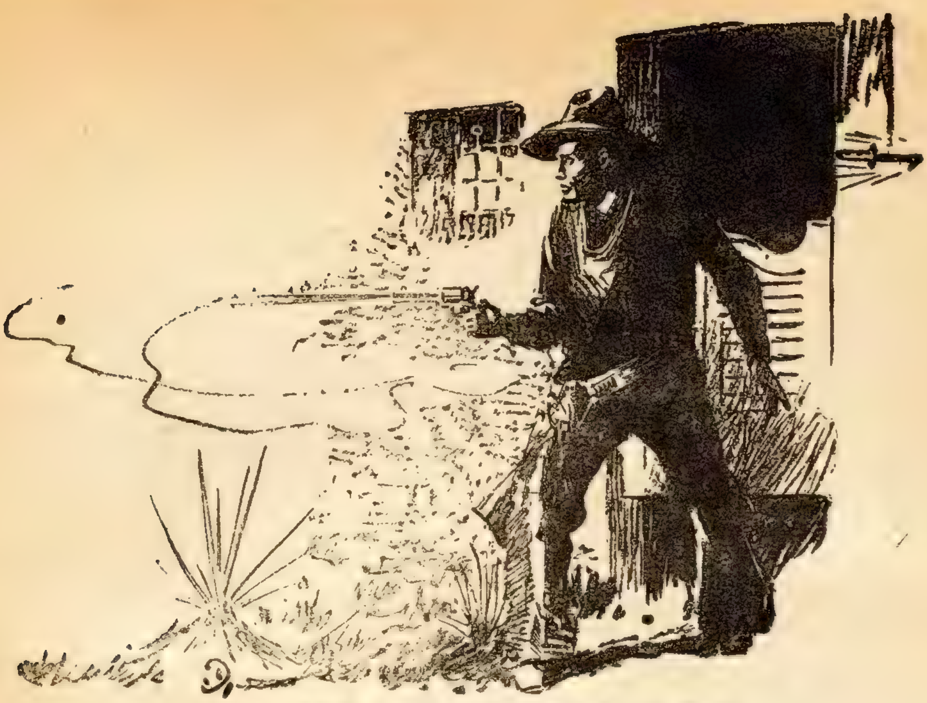
Fiendish joy lighted Blackwood's features. "Here's where we see Tuscon Smith shootin' to save his own skin," he laughed. "Diego, you got Smith's gun and ca'tridge belt? Hand 'em over to him, but make sure, first, he ain't got but *one* ca'tridge!"

(To be continued in the next issue)

TWO ONTARIO GOLD MINES HAVE YIELDED $219,412,000

THE Porcupine gold camp and Kirkland Lake camp have produced $219,412,276 worth of gold during the years since their discovery.

The Porcupine mines, which have been producing for sixteen years, have yielded over $190,000,000 in gold, while Kirkland Lake district, which shipped its first gold brick in 1914, has turned out $28,500,000 of the yellow metal.



DOUBLE TROUBLE

By R. L. Howard

With flying fists and searing lead, Big Johnny Colvin rips open the lair of a dry-gulching skunk.

BLINDED for the moment by the glare of midday sun on yellow sand, Johnny Colvin stood, broad back against the swinging doors of the Queen High Saloon from which he had just emerged, and, whistling softly through his teeth, expertly rolled a cigarette with one hand. The young cowpuncher's squinting eyes had detected a suspicion of movement in an alley between two unpainted shacks on the opposite side of the sand-rutted street. Then, a glistening object, sporadically reflecting the sun's rays like the scales on a flying fish, hurtled through the air straight toward the apparently unsuspecting Johnny.

But Johnny Colvin was never entirely unsuspecting. Although not at all certain as to the identity of that glistening object, he sprang aside, snatching at the gun in his belt even as he jumped.

A short-bladed knife thudded into the wall at the exact spot covered by Johnny Colvin's sturdy torso the moment before. The ominous twang of the vibrating knife had scarcely died away when Johnny's gun roared. The heavy leaden slug from his six-gun sped the length of that black alley across the street, tearing with clattering clamor into a garbage can behind the Chinese restaurant.

A yellow hound dog which had been inspecting this particular garbage can, fled, yowling at the top of its lungs. Johnny caught a brief glimpse of the lower portion of a pair of legs just disappearing behind the restaurant. Then, he was surrounded by an inquiring crowd.

Johnny lighted the cigarette which he had carefully held between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand all during the excitement, and pointed silently to the still quivering knife. Then, pushing his wide-brimmed Stetson far back on his yellow head, he grinned through an aromatic smoke screen, around the half circle of dark faces.

"Looks like somebody's plumb took a dislike t' me, already," he remarked, whimsically; "I sure must be an imposin' figger of a man. Doggone! Wherever I go things start happenin', immediate. Me, I jest naturally collects trouble like a fly-paper collects flies. Cain't understand it; and me so peaceful, too."

But the blond young cowpuncher's half smile and shining eyes belied his plaintive statement. However, even as the curious crowd milled about him, his quick eyes, peering over the head of even the tallest man there, inspected the litter of shadow-darkened shacks across the street, from which direction that glistening knife had come.

Although he had been a resident of Prairie City for something less than twenty-four hours, Johnny Colvin had already secured a job with the Twin Star Ranch and had succeeded in making a friend of every man he had met. The Twin Star's newest hand stood six feet, four inches in his stocking feet and weighed close to two hundred twenty-five pounds. In perspective he presented a distinctly formidable appearance. At close range, however, his bulk was forgotten, following a single glance at the yellow thatched head and the youthful face.

There was a certain quality in Johnny Colvin's pale blue eyes, however, which told very, very clearly that the young giant's heart was in keeping with his sturdy body. Even as men shook his hand and grinned in sympathy with his infectious smile, they were impressed by the assurance that Johnny Colvin would indeed be a bad man to argue with.

Accompanied by half a dozen of the more interested spectators, Johnny crossed the street and explored the little alley between Sam Lee's restaurant and the long deserted office of the Queen High Mining Company. There were tracks there in the sand, tracks made by a little man wearing high-heeled boots. These tracks led around behind the little restaurant and soon became lost in a maze of other tracks.

Johnny Colvin shrugged away his disappointment. "Got away, this time," he said; "but I do hope he stays with us. Sure will be too bad if somethin' happens to him before we can get together on the argument."

Johnny's fear that his unknown assailant might have set aside his murderous intention, after that first unsuccessful attempt, was soon proved to be groundless in a rather startling manner.

Although he was not due to report for work until the beginning of the month, which was three days hence, Johnny decided, principally for pecuniary reasons, to start at once for the Twin Star Ranch. After investing two dollars, the last of his worldly wealth, in a good meal, he started for the livery stable after his horse.

Except for a sleepy-eyed Mexican attendant the place was deserted. Johnny leisurely saddled his long-limbed roan. As he strapped his pack to the saddle, a curious tingling sensation spidered up and down his broad back. He turned swiftly and inspected the deserted stable.

Just as he was beginning to be assured that he was developing a case of nerves, the staccato report of a rifle sounded. The bullet literally fanned his cheek, struck his pack and tore this inanimate object off the horse's back. Johnny's gun appeared with the swiftness of magic in his right hand, and he fired three shots in the general direction of a tiny puff of smoke which drifted about a side of the stable. Then, gun in hand, he started running, zigzagging across the open toward the spot indicated by that tiny smoke cloud, from which spot he was sure the rifle bullet had come.

Gun in hand, he dashed headlong around the corner of the stables. There was no living thing in sight, but in the sun-baked ground there were many tracks. A big man wearing hobnailed shoes had paced rapidly up and down behind the stable, watching, and awaiting his chance probably.

Following that single shot, the would-be killer had fled precipitately. With a muttered oath, Johnny thrust the gun in his belt. As he started back toward his horse he was not laughing. He was mad, through and through.

Much of his usual good nature had returned, however, by the time Prairie City lay half a dozen miles behind him; the feel of a good horse between his knees invariably succeeded in putting him at peace with the world. Nevertheless, he smoked many cigarettes, and, as the trail he was following twisted upward and onward through a rock-littered draw, he found himself searching every sizable clump of mesquite, every stump and jagged boulder that might afford concealment for an enemy. His ears were constantly questing for unusual sounds.

So it was that as the clatter of hoofs sounded on a nearby ridge top, he drew the restive roan to a stop and squintingly inspected the sun-swept ridge in question. He discovered no signs of horsemen. Finally, with a shrug and a muttered oath, he continued on. The trail he was following zigzagged along the face of a gravelly slope, tending always upward toward the top of the ridge.

Just as he came out upon the ridge in question, the horse lifted its ears and whinnied softly. "What is it, Rocky?" Johnny muttered. The roan sought gently to turn aside from the trail. Johnny hesitated for a moment, then gave the horse its head.

Straight into a dense cluster of cottonwoods the horse went, and then, in a grass-grown open space just before him, Johnny discovered the cause of the horse's actions. In the exact center of that grassy open space a tiny spring bubbled up out of the gravel. Johnny Colvin grinned uncertainly. "Gorry, I sure am gettin' panicky," he muttered; "all right, horse, help yourself. Guess maybe I can stand a drink too."

Just as he was about to dismount, a round stone started rolling noisily down the gravelly slope on the opposite side of the little draw, some two hundred yards distant. Once again that tingling sensation spidered up and down Johnny's back. Tense bodied, alert, he turned, gun in hand. He caught a brief glimpse of a tiny puff of smoke, then, it was as though a red-hot iron had been drawn swiftly along his neck. Almost immediately thereafter the report of a rifle sounded, echoing sharply back and forth across the little valley. Another report swiftly followed the first, another and still another.

Johnny felt the roan horse shudder. Then, with a disturbing sound, strangely like a human groan, the animal pitched forward on its knees. Johnny struggled free of the stirrups and sprang aside just in time to keep from being thrown. He dashed headlong toward a clump of short trunked spruces just beyond the little spring.

Reaching this shelter, he crouched, breathing hard, gun in hand, keen eyes sweeping the wooded hillside on the opposite side of the valley. It would be foolish, he knew, to waste ammunition shooting at the puffs of smoke which were still discernible in the still air. That particular spot was well beyond the range of his six-gun.

For the better part of an hour he crouched there, motionless, watching. There were no more shots. A dozen times he had been tempted to search out his assailant, but each time his better judgment had convinced him that it would be foolish to make any attempt along these lines. In the first place, it would be night before he could surmount the rocky slope in order to reach the spot where the rifleman, or riflemen, stood. If his unknown enemy acted as on the two previous occasions he would long since have departed from the scene of action.

As the rolling valley mists, trailing along with the purple dusk, stealthily clothed the little valley in moist gray shadow, Johnny Colvin came to his feet, lit a cigarette and puffed rapidly. His horse was dead, shot between the eyes. For a long minute the young cowpuncher stood there looking down at his dead friend. "By God, Rocky, somebody is goin' to pay for this!" he muttered. "No sneakin' coyote can shoot my horse and get away with it."

But what could he do? Who were these skulking would-be assassins? Why had they chosen him as target for their persistent attempts? To the best of his knowledge, Johnny Colvin owned not a single enemy in the State of Arizona. Less than two months ago he had left Montana, his native habitat, and had started journeying leisurely southward. With no definite objective in view he had stopped off at Prairie City. Being pressed for ready money, he had sought and found a job with the Twin Star Ranch. Then came the knife throwing episode, and now . . . this.

The only answer which logically fitted into all angles of the unpleasant situation was that the would-be killers—for there was more than one, he was certain—mistook him for someone else. But, in Johnny Colvin's case, this solution did not hold water. He was a big man; an unusually big man. Not that big men were uncommon in this range country; but there were very few indeed, built along his peculiar lines. Men weighing well over two hundred pounds were not unusual. Tall men, standing well over six feet, were also plentiful.

But men approximating six feet, four inches in height and weighing two hundred twenty-five pounds were far from common. During the past half dozen hours two different men had made an attempt upon his life. Perhaps even a third had taken a hand in things up there on that wooded ridge top, an hour since. Even a hired killer would make very sure of the identity of the man he was after before putting a hired gun to work. It was conceivable that one man might make a mistake. But two men—possibly more—concentrating upon the same human object as fuel for their murderous proclivities, must be very sure indeed of the identity of their target.

He racked his brain to think of some individual, or group of individuals, who might so earnestly desire his demise as to go to all this trouble to bring about the desired result. His conclusion was always the same. He could think of no one.

This oft-recurrent conclusion brought him no easement, however. His baffled rage grew, until his usually pleasant face was set in hard, tight lines and his big body was tense with a frantic desire to come to grips with the killers. His anger was caused not altogether by a natural resentment at being fired upon as though he were a wooden target of some sort; the death of his horse, a faithful companion which had been his most prized possession for four years, was the circumstance which wrought his anger to a white heat.

As he stood there, blanket roll in hand beside the body of his dead horse, undecided whether to continue on to the Twin Star Ranch or hoof it back to Prairie City, a familiar odor came to him on the moist breeze. It was wood smoke . . . a campfire. And evidently it was near at hand. He grunted. A campfire might mean any one of many things. The one thing it surely meant was the presence of man, and food. The custodian of that campfire might be a friend or perhaps an enemy. Friend or enemy, however, Johnny Colvin was interested in that campfire.

Pausing only to make sure that his six-gun was in good working order, he started away up the valley trail, head on one side, periodically testing the mist-hung air for that telltale odor of wood smoke, which, in the gray darkness, alone would serve to lead him to his objective.

When something less than half a mile from his starting point, Johnny caught a glimmer of rose-tinted light up the slope to his right. He turned aside and made for the light. As he drew near, the odor of smoke became stronger. And then, the sound of voices came to him, muffled by the dense fog.

With the wetness underfoot deadening the sound of his footsteps, Johnny drew cautiously near. Details of the little camp slowly came clear. Two men, their faces cast into harsh masks against the red firelight, stood facing a third man across the fire. The two men, rifles in hand, were evidently on the point of leaving. One of these, a thick-bodied, stoop-shouldered fellow, was talking. At first, Johnny caught only meaningless fragments of the conversation. With a slight shift in the wind, the big man's words came clear.

"—I can't promise you nothin', Rath," the big man was saying. "It's up to Bert. But you know Bert LaCose almost as well as I do. When he pays a man good money for a job of work, he expects that job to be well done. You got to admit that he paid you well: you, a man with a price on your head and not darin' to show your nose in nary a town in Arizona. And what did you do to earn that money? You foozled . . . twice. . . ."

"But it ain't too late, yet," the man crouching on the opposite side of the fire whined. "I'll git him, Gus. I just didn't have no luck them two times. You missed him, yourself."

"Yeah, I know I did," the big man grudgingly admitted. "I nipped the pack off'n his horse's back, right under his nose. Can't figure out how I come to miss him. He moved just as I pulled the trigger. Seems like he must have been warned, somehow."

"Sure, that's just what *I* said," the crouching man chimed in eagerly. "I never in my life missed a thing as big as him at less than a dozen yards with a knife. I'm good at that stuff, you know it; but he twisted to one side, *after* the knife left my hand. And back there by the spring: Doggone! I had him dead to rights. But he wasn't there when the bullet got there. He just seemed to feel that bullet comin' his way."

The big man grunted disparagingly. "But you missed him. That's all Bert'll be interested in. You killed his horse, which will only make him ugly. And, if he ain't a damn fool altogether, he'll be watchin' his step from now on. If I'm any judge of men, the next feller that tackles that big boy, is going to have his hands full. Maybe you'll have another whack at him; and maybe you won't. Somethin' seems t' tell me the boss is goin' to be awful mad."

The crouching man groaned dismally.

"Of course," the big man called Gus added magnanimously, "I'll do everything I can to smooth it over, Spider; you know that. But I ain't promisin' you nothin'. And if I was you, I'd make tracks . . . for some place."

"But where can I go?" the man, Spider Rath, whined. "I don't dast leave these hills; even the dumbest of these country sheriffs could pick me up. Me, I stand out like a wart on a sore thumb, in a crowd of a thousand people."

The big man laughed disagreeably. "Well, that's your lookout," he rumbled. "You muffed this job, and Bert LaCose is going to be awful mad. If I was you I'd beat it. If you hang around here, Bert is apt to see to it that you stop a lead slug. And there you be: meat for the coyotes, or a chance on sneakin' away and crawlin' over the line into Mexico. Suit yourself." And with a shrug, the big man shouldered his rifle, and, followed by the third member of the trio, vanished into the night.

"For which information I am duly thankful," Johnny Colvin muttered. "Still and all, I don't know much; not even yet. Perhaps Mr. Spider Rath can tell me some more."

With remarkable stealth for such a big man, Colvin circled the little camp until he was facing Spider Rath's stooped back. Rath was a little man with twisted, unbeautiful features. A livid scar, its hideousness accentuated by the changing light from the fire, extended from the top of his sloping forehead, totally obliterating one eye and extending whitely the length of his stubble-covered face. Certain it was, Colvin told himself, that Spider Rath would experience difficulty in losing himself in a crowd.

For a long minute Johnny crouched, tense bodied, behind a screen of huckleberry bushes less than ten feet from the unsuspecting Spider. Evidently, the little man was lost in contemplation of his own distress. He wrung his thin hands, and, from time to time, groaned dismally.

And then, as Colvin crouched, preparatory to springing upon the hapless Spider, his right foot, groping for a firmer foothold, slid off a slippery rock with noisy clatter.

Spider Rath jumped as if he had been shot. Even as he came to his feet the little man snatched a knife from his belt. But quick as he was, Johnny Colvin was quicker. The big cowpuncher's long arm shot out of the darkness. His clubbed fist, propelled by two hundred and twenty-five pounds of bone and muscle, struck Spider Rath in the chest. The little gunman's feet left the ground. The knife flew from his fingers. His slim body catapulted backward. He landed, writhing, at the edge of the brisk-burning fire. He yelled hoarsely as the flames bit at him, wriggled aside and scrambled to his feet—into Johnny Colvin's waiting arms.

Sensing the crushing strength in the young cowpuncher's gripping hands, Spider Rath's frantic struggles soon ceased.

"That's the idea, Spider; save your strength," Johnny advised calmly. "I ain't goin' to hurt you, if you behave. I'll just look you over to kind of draw your fangs so to speak, then we'll have a little talk."

Johnny's quick exploration of the little man's person brought to light two more short-bladed, wooden-handled knives, and an automatic pistol.

"Sho now, you just naturally bristle with knives, don't you, Spider?"

The little man's scarred face twitched convulsively.

"You—you—you—!" he stuttered.

"That's right. It's me sure enough, Spider. And now, you just rustle me some grub. While I'm eating, you talk, see."

Spider Rath breathed a sigh of evident relief. He opened a can of beans, and set a pot of coffee over the fire. While the coffee was still simmering, Johnny hungrily devoured the food which Spider Rath accommodatingly placed before him.

"All right now, Spider, start talking," Johnny invited. "Don't take it to heart if I don't say much. I'm goin' to be right busy for the next few minutes. Anyhow, I ain't got nothin' to say. You're the one who's goin' to do the talkin'."

"What—what do you want to know?" The little man's one good eye nervously circled the blackness beyond the fire.

"Everything. Start right in at the beginning."

"I—I—don't know much."

"That's all right; don't stop to apologize . . . yet. You was hired to go gunnin' for me. Why?"

"I—I—I don't know . . . why. They pointed you out to me in Prairie City, an' they said, 'There he is; go git him.' That's all I know."

Johnny's face mirrored his disbelief. "Well, then—who am I?" he asked.

"Who—who—what do you mean?" the little man stuttered.

"Just what I say. They pointed me out to you and they said 'Go get him.' Who pointed me out to you?"

"Gus Drone."

"And who is Gus?"

"Bert LaCose's right-hand man."

"And who is Bert LaCose?"

"You—you mean to say you don't know who *he* is?"

"That's right, Spider."

It was Spider Rath's turn to register disbelief.

"Guess you're a stranger round here, right enough," the little man muttered. "There ain't a man in this part of the state that don't know Bert LaCose."

"What's his line?" Johnny innocently queried.

"Well, 'most anything. I guess it ain't no secret—that is, what I mean—him and Gus pulled some mighty slick jobs during the past couple of years. Do you remember readin' about the Golden Eagle Mine hold-up? And the stick-up of the First National Bank in Waldon?"

Johnny nodded, absently.

"Well, everybody knows that Bert LaCose and his gang pulled them two jobs; and there's been lots of others, of course. Cattle rustling, lately. Guess that last ain't no secret, neither. The Cattlemen's Association is after him, now, I hear. That scared him some. But they'll never get him—never—up here in these hills."

"All right . . . so much for Bert LaCose. Now, answer my question, Spider. Who am I?"

"But—but I told you, I don't know."

"They pointed me out to you and told you to bump me off. Didn't they tell you who I was supposed to be?"

"No, they didn't tell me nothin' only just what I said. Bert LaCose don't tell nobody his business. And it ain't healthy to ask him questions."

"You're tellin' me that you took two swipes at me, at so much per swipe as you might say, and you didn't even know who you was doin' business with?"

Spider Rath nodded, emphatically. "That's right," he agreed earnestly. "So help me, I—"

"All right, all right, that ain't nothin' only a detail, Spider. Now we're comin' to the heart of the matter so to speak. . . ."

Johnny helped himself to a cup of black coffee and sipped it pleasurably. "I gathered from your talk with Mr. Gus Drone that you're kind of teeterin' on the edge of a greasy chute, so to speak. That's right, ain't it, Spider?"

Without waiting for the little man to reply Johnny continued quickly: "And so, your worthless carcass couldn't be much more worthless, no matter what happened. Still right, ain't I? And so, Spider, before the glorious dawn shall come again, as the poet feller says, me and you is going to call on Mr. Bert LaCose."

Spider Rath's ugly face turned a sickly, yellowish gray. "Not that, cowboy! My God, it would be like runnin' my neck right into a noose."

Johnny laughed, unpleasantly. "By Gad, Spider,—on top of bein' one of the homeliest birds I ever laid eyes on, it seems like you're one of the dumbest, too. 'Run your neck into a noose,' says you. Just how far from said noose do you figure you are at this writing, so to speak? Mebbe I sound like an easy-going hombre and all that, but you ain't got no idea, Spider, how I just naturally yearn to snuggle these here fingers of mine around your Adam's apple. You'd be awful surprised if you knew how little it would take for me to start foolin' with that windpipe of your'n."

Spider Rath fidgeted uneasily. "All right," he said, hesitatingly; "I—I—I'll show you."

Ten minutes later, Spider Rath, a thin, strong band of rope noosed tightly about his scrawny neck, started away along the wooded ridge top, followed closely by Johnny Colvin, who held the other end of that noosed rope wrapped about his right arm.

For an hour the strange procession continued, Spider Rath leading the way, always upward into the foothills of Mount Gabeler. At the end of an hour, the valley mists were left behind them. The stars shone brightly, and the sparse thicket of slender jackpines upthrust out of the semi darkness on all sides, like the shattered hulks of big guns on a deserted battlefield.

They continued on, and upward, always upward, till the jackpine gave way to stunted cedar scrub. As they were traversing a rock-littered plateau far above the mist-hidden valley, the starlit stillness was abruptly shattered by the sound of rifle shots, Johnny thought. Two reports in quick succession, then two in slower rhythm, then three quick shots, then three with perhaps ten seconds between each shot.

"Sounds like signals of some kind," Johnny muttered. "Do them shots mean anything to you, Spider?"

The little man professed ignorance.

"All right, I don't care whether you're lyin' or not. How much farther have we got to go?"

"Ten miles, easy. It'll be daylight when we get there."

JUST as the first gray shafts of light were appearing in the east, Spider Rath turned abruptly aside into a narrow, rock-walled ravine.

"Just so it don't slip your mind, Spider," Johnny whispered huskily, assured, somehow, that they were near their destination, "this noose is kind of a hair-trigger affair, so to speak. It's knotted, you remember, and it's made of silk. Of course, it's your noose and you know more about it than I do; but I've seen the things before, and, as I remember it, all it needs is a little tug and you won't be able to breathe so good. You can't loosen it. But you know all about that, don't you, Spider? I—"

Spider Rath nodded and made a motion indicating that silence was desirable.

As they came out into a green valley beyond the ravine, the little man's step slowed. And then, Johnny Colvin saw it: a substantial cabin built into an angle of the rocky wall less than half a mile ahead. Johnny stood close at Spider Rath's side.

"You're sure that's the place, Spider? But I know it is; I can tell by the way you act."

Half hidden behind a screen of upjutting boulders, Johnny Colvin studied that sturdy cabin and the topography of the surrounding country, for several minutes. Then he turned to Spider Rath. "You know, Spider, it's hell to lose a good horse. I can't think of nothin' that will make a good-natured feller like me any madder. You shot my horse, Spider, and I'm powerful sore about it. But there's no sense in knifin' you. You ain't worth it. This feller LaCose is the bird I'm after. And I'm going to get him, Spider.

"Now, just step over here right close to me for a minute and I'll give you the bad news: First, we'll sneak up there and take care of the guard. There's a guard, ain't there? Sure, I knew there must be.

"With the guard out of the way, then, you and me, we'll tramp right up to Mr. LaCose's front door. You rap on that door real loud-like, and when somebody says 'What the hell!' you say, 'It's me, Spider.' Then there'll be a lot more cursing; but finally, somebody'll open that door. The boys is apt to be right sleepy this time of day; but we won't take no chances. The minute that door swings open, you drop flat on your face . . . and stay there! Because the minute that door is open, me, I'm goin' to start shootin'. And I'm goin' to shoot to kill. How many of 'em is there, do you suppose, Spider?"

"Three, besides LaCose; maybe more."

"How about them fellers what was doin' all the shootin' last night?"

"None of LaCose's men, I'm sure. They all report here every night. Bert don't trust nobody out of his sight."

"You was scared to go home last night, is that it, Spider?"

The little man nodded.

Fortune favored Johnny from the first. At the edge of the open space just beyond the cabin he came upon the guard, swathed in many blankets, sleeping soundly, back against a tree. A tap on the head with the barrel of a six-gun, and this individual was definitely out of things for some time to come. Leaving the guard bound and gagged at the foot of the twisted cedar, Johnny, preceded by the trembling Spider, boldly approached the cabin. The little man's abject fear was pitiable, as he stood there facing that log door and what he firmly believed to be sudden death. Not until Johnny had twice tightened suggestively on the silken noose, did Spider Rath muster up courage to rap on the door.

The little man's first tentative rap brought a growl of warning from his captor. His next attempt was more businesslike. There sounded the slap of bare feet on the board floor inside the cabin. A sleepy voice sung out a profane inquiry.

"Me . . . Spider," the little man quavered.

There followed again the slap-slap of bare feet across the floor. Then, the door was yanked inward. A drowsy-eyed individual, a mop of flaming red hair half hiding his squinting eyes, stood there, scowling. Obeying his instructions to the letter, Spider Rath flopped flat on his face with a quick jerk. Spider's rifle, in Johnny Colvin's hand, unwaveringly indicated the red-haired man's heart. "Stick 'em up!" Johnny hissed. Without an instant's hesitation the man obeyed. He stumbled backward, hands high above his head as Johnny pushed on into the cabin.

Johnny's quick glance made out three bunks, all of them occupied. Moving slowly backward under Colvin's watchful eye, the red-headed man's bare feet encountered a round stick of firewood. As luck would have it, the stick slid from beneath his groping heel. His bare foot flew from under him. For an instant he struggled wildly for balance, then toppled, noisily, still struggling, to the floor.

The racket caused by his heavy body landing upon the loose board flooring might well have sufficed to awake the dead. The three blanket-shrouded figures occupying the bunks, simultaneously took on motion. Three startled faces turned toward the intruder. Johnny Colvin recognized Gus Drone and his companion of the night before, an angular fellow with a huge, hooked nose. The third man was a sturdy, black-whiskered fellow. Johnny guessed that this latter was none other than Bert LaCose, himself.

Johnny backed away swiftly so that his rifle could command all five men. He lowered the gun until its motionless black barrel indicated LaCose. "The jig's up, LaCose," he said, low voiced. "You started this little argument with me. I'm finishing it. Roll out. I'm takin' you-all bye-bye down to Prairie City for a little picnic with the sheriff."

Bert LaCose's black eyes had never left Johnny Colvin's face. "I don't get you," he muttered. "Who the hell are you?"

Johnny laughed. "You've got a short memory, Bert," he chided. "Yesterday you knew me well enough to sic two of your killers on me."

Bert LaCose achieved a white-lipped grin. His quick glance shifted to where Spider Rath lay flat on his face near the door.

"Come, come,—hop to it! I ain't particularly anxious to take *all five* of you along with me. You're worth as much dead as you are alive. I'd just as soon leave you here for the buzzards to nibble at."

The bandit chief slowly rolled out of his blankets. Striving to keep an eye on everyone, all the time, Johnny failed to detect Hook Nose as the latter slid a hand along the side of his bunk. Suddenly, a deafening explosion, muffled by several thicknesses of woolen blanket, sounded. The heavy leaden slug thudded into the log wall less than six inches from Johnny Colvin's head. The bullet had scarcely reached its destination when Johnny's rifle spat fire. Hook Nose grunted. His angular body jolted solidly back against the wall. Then he crumbled forward and lay, face down, on his dirty pillow. His body twitched once, then lay very still.

Momentarily, a smudge of smoke caused by the blankets, which were smouldering, obscured the movements of both LaCose and Drone. Rifle ready, Johnny took a long step nearer. There was a brief flash of light on metal, then another roaring report, as LaCose, crouching at the foot of his bunk, fired from the hip. The shot went wild. Johnny fired into the smoke screen from which the shot had come. A gusty grunt assured him that his bullet had found a mark.

Then the smoke cleared away miraculously and Johnny saw that the back door was open. Taking advantage of the confusion, Spider Rath had snaked his way across the floor and had made good his escape through the back door. As the smoke, carried away by the draft caused by the sudden opening of that rear door, cleared away, Johnny caught a quick glimpse of Gus Drone as the latter dodged behind the heavy wooden table. Johnny fired, on suspicion.

And then, strong arms suddenly caught him about the knees. Just for an instant Red Whiskers had been out of his line of vision. Without taking his eyes from LaCose, who, although wounded, found partial shelter behind an angle in the wall, Johnny struck downward with his rifle barrel at Red Whiskers' long arms which were tugging at his knees. Again and again he struck, until the grip relaxed and fell away.

He caught a brief glimpse of Drone's thick legs circling about the table. He took quick aim, fired, and had the satisfaction, this time, of seeing a sturdy leg whisk abruptly out of sight as though it had been slapped aside by a club wielded by mighty hands.

Johnny was vaguely aware that Red Whiskers was crawling away, hugging the cabin wall. He dared not take his attention from LaCose and Drone long enough to follow Red Whiskers' movements. LaCose had been edging slowly about the niche in the wall where he was hiding, striving to bring Johnny within range of his automatic. Following the movements of the bandit chief's gun arm, Johnny sent a shot crashing into the wall an inch away from that forward creeping arm. The gun dropped from LaCose's fingers, and he swore earnestly.

With LaCose out of the fight for an instant, Johnny turned quickly toward Red Whiskers. As he turned, a club as thick as a man's arm, in Red Whiskers' hand, swished downward, aimed accurately at Johnny's head. Johnny sprang aside. The heavy club landed glancingly on his shoulder, and within the next instant, he was locked in deadly embrace with the wielder of that club.

Fighting with the ferocity of despair, Red Whiskers was no mean antagonist. He was a young man and a powerful one. His efforts from the first were devoted to holding his enemy. With both arms pinned to his sides, Johnny bunched his shoulders and with a quick, upward, surging motion swung his antagonist clear about in a stubborn half circle. This maneuver brought Red Whiskers' back against the cabin wall. Then, suddenly, Johnny lowered his head and thrust his opponent back against the rough log wall.

The man's head struck with a curious hollow sound against an outjutting log. His grip about Johnny's body relaxed, ever so slightly. With a grunting heave Johnny pulled free, caught Red Whiskers' sagging body by the shoulders and turned quickly, just as Drone, having possessed himself of a club, rushed headlong into the fray. For an instant Johnny braced against the wall, then, twisting Red Whisker's weakly struggling body, he hurled the human missile at the onrushing Drone. Gus Drone was knocked neatly off his feet.

Thrown off balance for a moment, Johnny staggered back against the wall. This involuntary movement undoubtedly saved his life. Three shots sounded in quick succession. All three bullets thudded into the wall exactly where Johnny Colvin's head had been an instant before.

Bert LaCose, automatic in hand, sprang out of his hiding place. Johnny swung sidewise, reaching for the six-gun in his belt, even as he moved. Dropping on a knee behind the doubtful shelter afforded by a hand-made chair, he fired quickly. The shot went wild. A bullet splintered the chair back. Again Johnny fired, again and still again. Bert LaCose came purposefully on.

Johnny wondered mildly why that ugly automatic, held rigidly in the bandit chief's right hand, no longer belched its leaden messages of death. Then he saw a red splotch over LaCose's heart. This red spot grew larger, momentarily. And then, when less than a dozen feet away, Bert LaCose stumbled and fell headlong, sprawling upon the still struggling forms of Gus Drone and the half-conscious Red Whiskers.

Drone pulled free and struggled to his feet. The big man still held the club. Johnny swung his gun about and pulled the trigger. A snapping click told him that his gun was empty. Gus Drone yelled, and lunged forward. But to the latter's surprise, Johnny Colvin did not back away. Instead, he sprang forward. His long arm shot out, and, even as the flailing club in Drone's hand landed glancingly a-top Johnny's head, the latter's fist drove with crushing force into Drone's face. Gus Drone dropped like a rotten log.

Johnny Colvin's knees shook. He tottered, groping for the table top which seemed to evade his clutching fingers.

Johnny was vaguely aware that Red Whiskers was on hands and knees and striving to pry Bert LaCose's fingers, still in death, from about the automatic pistol. Then, a crackling report sounded from the open doorway. Red Whiskers' sturdy body spun half about; the man fell heavily, his shaggy head burrowing with a curious centrifugal motion into the hard floor. Johnny's senses cleared miraculously. He faced the doorway, useless gun held, club fashion, in his hand.

A big man, rifle in hand, stood there, his wide-shouldered bulk filling the doorway. Open mouthed, Johnny Colvin stared, then he swore softly under his breath. As far as physical dimensions went, the man in the doorway was almost an exact counterpart of Johnny Colvin. There, the resemblance ceased, however. The new arrival was a much older man than Johnny; his hair was grizzled at the temples and his eyes were a steely blue. The new arrival smiled.

"Hallo Johnny!" he greeted.

Johnny Colvin swallowed hard. "Who —who—who the hell are you?" he muttered.

Johnny was surprised at the sound of his own voice. It was husky and seemed to come from a great distance. He was suddenly dizzy headed and sick. He was vaguely aware that the big man who had greeted him so familiarly was crossing the room toward him. Then a strong arm clasped him about the body and led him out into the sunlight.

The bright sun just peeping over the eastern hills blinded him for a moment. Even so he realized that the open space before the cabin was filled with horsemen, all armed with rifles. Spider Rath was there, cowering between two men. Johnny pulled free from the encircling arm and slumped down on a log. A tin dipper filled with ice-cold water was held to his lips. He drank thirstily, and felt better at once.

The big stranger stood looking down at him.

"Who—who are you?" Johnny asked again.

"My name is Slattery, Johnny, and I sure want to thank you for doubling for me. I'm employed by the Cattlemen's Association as a sort of special investigator. Was on my way to palaver some with LaCose. Evidently, Bert knew I was coming. He mistook you for me and I guess from what I've heard so far, you've had a merry time of it."

Johnny was still a bit dizzy. He nodded. "Yeah," he said, "they killed my horse."

Slattery nodded, understandingly. "Yes, I know, Johnny. I'm awful sorry about that. A good horse can't be replaced. Still, you—you've certainly earned yourself the price of the best horse money can buy. LaCose, in there, is worth exactly two thousand dollars, dead or alive. Red O'Brien and Gus Drone are worth a thousand apiece. I don't know the other fellow; but there's four thousand dollars, Johnny. Not a bad night's work, if you ask me."

Johnny grinned, wanly. "Yeah," he agreed; "but there's one thing you and me will kind of have to get together on, Big Boy. You'll have to put me hep as to your movements from now on, because, believe me, where you are is one place I just naturally ain't goin' to be."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

ON THE DODGE

By

GLENN A. CONNOR

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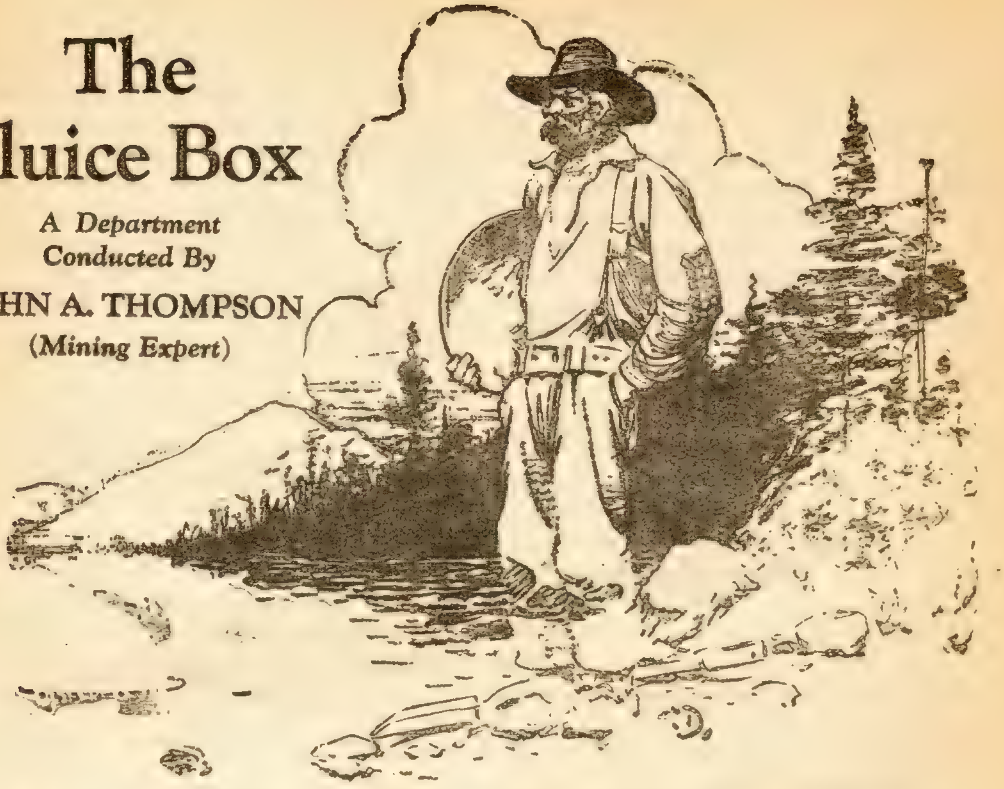
The Sluice Box

A Department
Conducted By
JOHN A. THOMPSON
(Mining Expert)



THIS department is intended to be of real interest and practical assistance to all readers of ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE. It is conducted by the well-known John A. Thompson, mining expert. In it each issue will be published some interesting facts concerning the various phases of prospecting and mining, based on John A. Thompson's many years of actual experience in the West and in Alaska. Prospecting problems and procedure will be discussed regularly. Also, questions relating to mining laws, field conditions, new and old mining territories, and so forth, will be answered in this department. If you wish a personal answer, enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your question. Address all questions to John A. Thompson, Mining Expert, care of ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE, 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.

No. 15 Underwater Prospecting

UNDERWATER prospecting used to be a topic of conversation more than anything else. After the supper dishes had been wiped and the wood box filled for the evening, and the boys had climbed into their bunks to smoke and chew the rag for a while, sooner or later somebody was sure to remark:

"You know the rich beach sands that caused the stampede to Nome? Well, I got a hunch that somewhere along the floor o' the Bering Sea is another pay streak . . . a stretch o' sea bottom lousy with gold. If there was only a way to get a little preliminary prospectin' done, I could locate it sure as shootin'."

Suggestions as to how to go about the problem of submarine mining would then be in order. Everything was thought of. Importing Kanaka pearl divers from the Pacific, getting a cumbrous diving suit and stumbling along the ocean floor with shovel and gold pan in search of the undersea bonanza. Deep-water dredges would be suggested.

Then somebody else would speak up:

"I don't know what the chances are of finding a good placer on sea bottom, or how you could work it, if you did, but I do know one thing. Take the lake regions of northern Canada for instance. There's many a good quartz vein gets lost goin' into or under some of those lakes. Now if you could pick up, or trace out a vein along a lake bottom. . . ."

While the hardrock miner was explaining his theories concerning the discovery of a rich gold-bearing vein beneath the blue waters of his beloved lakes, someone would bring up the question of rivers.

"A man can go wadin' over the riffles in a creek and testin' out the gravel bars and bends for colors with his pan, but the big rivers are different. Too deep, too wide, too swift . . . or a lot of things that'll keep a man from prospectin' the big streams. What's layin' on the bottom along the center line o' them rivers anyhow? Mebbe a pile o' solid gold nuggets jest rollin' over each other with the current, for all you can tell to the contrary."

Lately underwater prospecting has become more than idle speculation. In the future it may provide the means for uncovering the next big bonanza. Not so long ago considerable underwater prospecting was done in the lake districts of Canada, according to statements made by E. M. Kindle in the *Canadian Mining Journal.*

Obviously neither pick nor shovel, the prospector's customary allies, can be relied upon to be of much service in his underwater operations. The first essential is a sturdy boat—preferably a good stout motor launch.

To prospect under water with any degree of thoroughness, it is necessary to possess not only some suitable apparatus that will bring up a fair sample of the material to the top of the river, or lake bottom, but also some means of getting down to depths in the bottom itself. For it is reasonable to assume that under water, as on land, the heavy particles of gold or other valuable mineral matter have sifted down through the lighter material until they form their richest deposits close to bed-rock.

An apparatus has been devised for this purpose and used with more or less success in certain districts of northern Canada, according to Kindle. The instrument is very similar to the common "snapper" used for catching hold of underwater cables that have sunk into the ooze and silt of lake or river bottom. It consists of two clamlike iron jaws, actuated by a strong spring and a toggle attached to a long rod. The rod is made so that extensions may be easily fitted on to give greater length when necessary.

In operating the snapper, the jaws are carefully worked into the bottom of the lake, or river, and then closed by a jerk on the toggle. The sample of material brought up when the jaws have been sprung can be panned for traces of gold or other heavy minerals.

This apparatus is comparatively simple and inexpensive. The main trouble with it lies in the fact that its use is limited to places where the water is not too deep. Also the character of the bottom must be such that the jaws can be readily worked into it.

A more elaborate apparatus that has been used in some cases consists of a small orange-peel bucket, of the type common in channel dredging. The bucket is worked by means of a windlass and tripod frame rigged securely over the stern of the boat.

Such an outfit has the following advantages over the snapper system. Larger samples of the bottom are brought up, and brought up with every haul of the bucket. And greater depth may be prospected. On the other hand, an orange-peel bucket outfit is not only more expensive regarding the initial cost, but it also requires a larger and sturdier build of boat because of the windlass and tripod hoist that must be erected.

Aside from the many improvements still to be made in the technique of underwater prospecting, there are several drawbacks to the novel and fascinating game.

In the first place, underwater prospecting offers practically no opportunity for a general observation of the rock formations. The veins, the dikes, and the mineral-bearing outcrops which may run along the bottom of a lake, all have to be found and located by careful and diligent work. On land a good quartz outcrop in open country may often be seen at a glance, or spotted from a long distance. They have to be fished for under water.

Furthermore, the underwater prospector is much more dependent on the weather than is his companion who sticks to terra firma. This is especially true in off-shore dredging along the seacoast, or in dredging the larger lakes, where storms and turbulent surface water conditions make the operation of any apparatus from a small boat not only extremely difficult, but often actually dangerous. Expense is another item. Even the simplest snapper and the most primitive launch involve an outlay that is large, in comparison to the price of a pick and shovel and a good gold pan. And the gold pan is necessary anyhow.

Nevertheless it is quite within the realm of the possible for some enterprising adventurer to hit upon a rich deposit under water. His good fortune will stimulate others, and the devising of improved methods of underwater prospecting and mining once begun, will soon open up a new and almost virgin field of hitherto untouched mineral treasure.

The field is larger than might be realized on first thought. Aside from the bed of the Bering Sea off Nome, where several efforts have already been made to locate rich gold-bearing sands out beyond the present coast line, there is the sea bottom to be considered off the northern coast of California and Oregon, where placer gravels and placer platinum have been found along the beach.

There are also the beds of deep rivers in areas that are known to be mineralized, and the unexplored lake bottoms in country adjacent to already discovered ores—Canada's lake districts, for instance.

Profitable gold dredging can now be carried on as much as seventy feet under water. Find deeper deposits that will warrant development, and it is safe to predict that engineering ingenuity will devise a means of working them.

1—(*a*) *Besides gold and silver, what minerals has a prospector a chance of finding in the United States?* (*b*) *In what states do the minerals occur? Alva Johnson, Benton Harbor, Michigan.*

Ans. (*a*) The following are the principal industrial minerals known to exist in the United States and for which the prospector should be on the lookout. The list, for easy preliminary classification, has been divided into two groups, the metallic and the non-metallic minerals.

Metallic: Antimony, arsenic, chromium, cobalt, copper, gold, iron, lead, manganese, mercury, molybdenum, nickel, platinum, radium, silver, tin, tungsten, uranium, vanadium, zinc.

Non-metallic: Asbestos, asphalt, bauxite (aluminum), building stones (granite, marble, limestone, sandstone, etc.), chalk, clay, feldspar, Fuller's earth, garnet (both gem and abrasive varieties), graphite, gypsum, magnesite, mica, monazite, nitrates, oil and oil shales, phosphate rocks, potash, precious stones, pumice, pyrites, quartz, salt, sulphur, talc, zirconium.

That's a wide range of minerals the U. S. offers the prospector. Of course, not all are to be expected in one locality. Some are found in several sections, others only in a few parts of the country.

(*b*) For the purpose of listing the minerals by states, three large geographical groupings of the United States have been considered, namely, Eastern States, Central States, and Western States. The first group includes Alabama, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North and South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia.

The Central States comprise Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Louisiana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas and Wisconsin. In the third or Western group are Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

Tabulation of minerals by the locality in which they are most likely to be found:

Eastern States: Abrasives, aluminum, building stone, clay, coal, feldspar, Fuller's earth, gems, gold (small quantities), graphite, gypsum, iron, limestone, manganese, mica, monazite, phosphate rocks, salt, slate, talc, zinc.

Central States: Abrasives, aluminum, building stone, clay, copper, coal, gypsum, iron, lead, limestone, manganese, mercury, oil and oil shale, salt, sulphur, zinc.

Western States: Asbestos, building stone, chromium, clay, copper, gems, gold, gypsum, lead, limestone, magnesite, manganese, mercury, molybdenum, oil and oil shale, phosphate rocks, salt, silver, talc, tungsten, tin (small quantities), uranium, vanadium, zinc.

The above is a fairly comprehensive digest of the whole business. If you are further interested see Bulletin 624 of the U. S. Geological Survey, "Useful Minerals of the United States," by Samuel Sanford and R. W. Stone.

2—(*a*) *What timber rights has a prospector on a regularly staked and duly recorded mining claim? Herbert Berg, Pocatello, Idaho.*

Ans. (*a*) Prospectors and miners are allowed to use the timber growing upon claims or other mineral lands, but its use must be entirely for mining or domestic purposes, and the timber must not be sold.

Do You Know Your SLUICE BOX?

1—About how deep is the deepest oil well, or oil bore in the United States?

2—Where is it?

3—In which two western states are the rare radium ores principally found?

4—What type of ore lends itself most readily to discovery by electrical prospecting methods?

5—What is the first requirement in staking a mining claim under the U. S. mining laws?

(The answers to these questions will be printed in the next issue of ACE-HIGH.)

Answers to Questions in Second December Issue

1—"Float" rocks are the loose or scattered pieces of ore that have broken off from an outcrop or vein. 2—Lava is the molten material that pours out from volcanoes. 3—Veins do not necessarily carry ore. They may be barren. 4—Aside from gold, nuggets of copper, silver, platinum and occasionally small bits of free iron may be encountered. 5—The pay-shoot is that section of a vein in which the ore values lie.

The transportation problem is often a serious factor in a prospecting trip. Once a locality has been decided upon the first question is always: How to get there? Don't forget to get ACE-HIGH. In the next issue "How to Get There" will be discussed in this department.

John A. Thompson

* * *

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912. Of Ace-High Magazine, published semi-monthly, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1928. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a notary public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared W. M. Clayton, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of the Ace-High Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher Readers' Publishing Corp., 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.; Editor, H. A. McComas, 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, A. Echols, 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.; Business Manager, W. M. Clayton, 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Readers' Publishing Corp., 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.; Fred Schiverea, Jr., 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.; Publishers' Fiscal Corp., 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.; W. M. Clayton and Nathan Goldmann, 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. W. M. Clayton, business manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 22nd day of September, 1928, T. H. Mearns. (My commission expires March 30, 1930.)

The Country Store

A GET-TOGETHER DEPARTMENT FOR GENERAL SERVICE TO OUR READERS

Conducted by The Storekeeper

THE BARGAIN COUNTER

If you want to exchange something you have, but don't want, for something you want that someone else has, here is the place to do it. It must be understood that ACE-HIGH *cannot be held responsible for losses sustained by our readers.*

Announcements inserted free of charge, but they must not exceed 21 words inclusive of name and address, and must be either typed or hand-printed. Nothing but BONA FIDE trades acceptable; announcements of articles for sale will be ignored. State both what you have and what you want. Study examples of announcements in this issue for the proper way to draft yours.

The United States Government prohibits the mailing of firearms capable of being concealed on the person, therefore swaps of revolvers, pistols, etc., will not be published in The Bargain Counter.

Have several high-grade guns to trade for others. Write what you have and want. Lewis B, Richardson, Trafalgar, Indiana.

Have golf clubs, ash rod, steel rod, fishing poles. Want 12-ga. shotgun or pitcher's and catcher's mitts. Stanley E. Pennington, 1116A 20th St., Sacramento, Calif.

Have Chevrolet, 3 to 1 gears. What have you? A. Wilson, 7400 Melrose Ave., Detroit, Mich.

Will give 85 stamps for each coin, arrowhead, curio, mineral or agate. Write. William Michaelis, Jr., 25 Williams, Crystal Lake, Ill.

Want all breeds of poultry, young or old. Have typewriter, camera, guitar, or? Write. Bruce Caudill, Box 462, Harlan, Ky.

Checkers, instructions to play, two new ways. For? T. F. Moore, R. 2, La Grange, N. C.

Have cowboy songs, recipes for making face powder, cold cream and perfume. What have you? Pearl Wagoner, Wilson, Okla.

Have fountain pens, guns, microscope, pocketscope Sr., etc. Want old coins. My list for yours. Bruce Bunch, 318 Fourth Ave., No., St. Petersburg, Fla.

Ka-bar hunting knife, U. S. Army cot, 10 Victrola records to trade for wood-working tools. Henry Mitchell, 1216 Mary St., Evansville, Ind.

Have ladies' handbag, books, magazines, English money. Want to swap for violin, or what have you? Miss E. Carlyou, 1000 Richmond St., London, Ont., Canada.

Have tenor banjo course, show card course, and? Want typewriter, microscope, salesmanship course. Henry J. Mooney, 472 Brook Ave., Bronx, N. Y.

20 White King pigeons for good Henderson motorcycle engine, running. Guy Merck, 366 Sixth St., N. W., Atlanta, Ga.

Have .22 rifle, electric engineering course, 1-tube radio, etc. Want good motorcycle, Hawaiian guitar, saxophone, or? E. N. Goray, 28½ S. Main St., Masontown, Pa.

Tear this slip off and mail it with your announcement—it entitles you to one *free* insertion in this Department. Announcements are limited to 21 words—trades only—no others considered. Announcements must be either typed or hand-printed.

Name..

Street..

City..

(Void after January 5, 1929.)

Have Amberole and records, mandelette camera, incubator, violin, child's clothing, 1-tube radio, wrist watch. Bertha Chapman, R. 3, Manchester, Ohio.

Brand new cowboy spurs, bits and stirrups, handsomely ornamented and engraved. Want camp goods, firearms, or? Harlan Bridwell, Forestburg, Texas.

Want old Godey, Peterson, Leslie, Harper, Century, Scribner magazines. Have many things. Everybody with these magazines write. O. Soukup, 6720 So. Ashland Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Remington No. 6 typewriter, fine Illinois 16 size 17-jewel watch, 20-year case. Want radio and .22 repeater. A. W. Vincent, Farina, Ill.

Have Indian bone beads, wampum beads, scrapers, hammer stone, guitar skull, Coleman lamp. Trade for other Indian relics. Edward B. Mosely, R. 4, Box 210A, Waco, Texas.

Have radio sets, parts, printing press, typewriter and books of all kinds. Send list. Edward H. Turnier, Jr., Box 234, Hoboken, N. J.

Have hand-made cartridge belt and holster for .38 special. Want swords, antique pistols, or? M. Hetzel, 4145 W. 21st Pl., Chicago, Ill.

Want tenor banjo. Have 1-tube cabinet radio, earphones, speedometer, magazines, Erector set, and B-B gun. Matthew Winkler, 1744 Myrtle Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Will trade portable phonograph with 15 records and 1-tube Monodyne, for telescope. Tony Sowin, 245 Sheridan Ave., Albany, N. Y.

Have radio, gun, rifle, motors, boats, parts, books, war souvenirs for auto, land, rifles, or? Stuart Lin, 211 Delaware City, Delaware.

Will exchange views or souvenirs of Cincinnati, Ohio, for views or souvenirs of your city. W. W. Pryor, 957 W. Court St., Cincinnati, Ohio.

Bound volume Frank Leslie's New York Journal for 1855, Youth's Companions, 1891-92. Want old 5c. novels. W. M. Burns, 15 Cottage St., Rockland, Me.

Want old documents, books, coins, stamps, relics, newspapers, almanacs, scrap books. Have binoculars, telescope, musical instruments, camera. J. Settel, 24 Crosby Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Will trade for high-grade stamps. Send 2c. stamp for plan. Soules Stamp Exchange, 705 Plymouth Bldg., Minneapolis, Minn.

Have lots of gladiola bulbs to offer. What have you? Fred G. Carman, Northwood, N. D.

Want novels of any kind but love in exchange for Savage .22 single shot rifle and good pair of French binoculars. Alfred Newton Yorsey, 36 Jouvette St., New Bedford, Mass.

Will trade 100 different stamps for every large cent sent me. Some are U. S. over 50 years old. C. E. Alberts, 2715 N. Main St., Rockford, Ill.

Want battery charger, transmitter, land, or? Have Ford. William Thorpe, 440 S. 4th St., Hamilton, O.

Have lumberjack, 14½-in. neck, blue, with elastic bottom. Have Winchester, model 1890, .22 pump, octagon barrel. Warren Smith, 21 So. Adams, San Angelo, Texas.

Rocks, agates, jaspers and other minerals to exchange for those of other localities. John Tracy, 601 Orange St., Portland, Ore.

Café to trade for barber shop, ukelin, for typewriter. All letters answered. P. A. Shirkey, Wheaton, Kans.

Have radio, picture-developing outfit, cornet, pocket adding machine, Metaggas engine, 6-volt generator. Want 4-cyl. magneto, or? Norman Wirth, Hatton, Wash.

Want AC electric motors and wood-working machinery, large or small. Anything in diamonds or jewelry to exchange, good value. Ray Kirby, 2918 Arizona St., Dallas, Texas.

Swap .30-cal. Remington h. p. pump for good step plane or fine Indian relics. H. T. Daniel, Dardanelle, Ark.

100 different stamps for each magazine of adventure or dime novel. George A. Popple, Danielson, Conn.

Give fox or coonhound pups, ready to train. Want .22 repeater, binoculars, or? K. Sallee, Brownville, Nebr.

Will trade good 7-jewel pocket watch for typewriter, bracket for a motor wheel, or? Write. Paul J. Jenson, 112 Center St., Neenah, Wisc.

Want chickens, tents, or? Have rings, skunk dogs, etc. Lambert Bailey, Wadena, Iowa.

Specimen of cap rock from San Jon, New Mexico, to trade for anything useful. I trade stamps and coins also. Byron Hullet, Protection, Kans.

Have typewriter, coal burning brooder, electric incubator. Want radio outfit in good condition, complete. S. E. Rider, 704 Third St., Helena, Mont.

Have binoculars, typewriter, old books, albums, magazines, newspapers, coins, medals, for books, guns, antiques. J. H. Sudbeck, 4610 N. 20th St., St. Louis, Mo.

Want old-time guns, Indian relics, tapaderos, spade bit, binoculars, or? Have .22 rifle, fancy hair bridle, silver-studded martingale. E. F. Carlson, R. 4, Box 115, Little Falls, Minn.

Have antique pistol, swords, watches, knives, pen, electric motors, radio, etc. Want .22 Remington or Winchester repeater, or? Gaza E. Moich, 54 New St., New Brunswick, N. J.

Have fly outfit, complete, also Winchester rifle, .40-82. Want firearms. B. A. Tillman, 1420 Byron St., Huntington, Ind.

Will swap coin book for 12 United Cigar certificates. W. J. White, Box 876, City Hall Sta., New York City.

Attention shotgun owners! If you want to trade, write giving description and what's wanted in first letter. J. W. Seward, 7521 62nd St., Ango, Ill.

Will trade Underwood, Remington, or L. C. Smith typewriter, new, for a good Milo bar-bell. Charley West, St. Albans, W. Va.

Have Harry Glick's "Physical Culture" course. Will trade for other physical culture courses, or? David Klug, 1721 E. 3rd St., Dayton, Ohio.

Two-chair barber shop to trade for a light car. W. A. Whitney, Alvin, Texas.

Have Placer gold nuggets, some weighing half ounce, to trade for arrowheads, tomahawks, stone knives and other Indian relics. Jim Blunt, 3046 Field Ave., Los Angeles, Calif.

Have thousands of postage stamps to exchange for all sorts of coupons. J. W. Barnaby, 120 Broadway, Malden, Mass.

Have desirable city property. Best farm district, Middle West. Want Colorado property, or? B. Miller, Cloquet, Minn.

Want U. S. precanceled stamps. Have Mexican currency, movie star covers, or? H. J. Morse, 218½ W. 4th St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Have 8 x 10 copying, enlarging and reducing camera. What have you to offer for it? Fred R. Wolcott, 234 Washington Sq., Syracuse, N. Y.

Portable typewriter, mandolin-banjo, binoculars, books, machinists' tools, for 5-tube radio, small printing press, mounted birds, etc. A. V. Jensen, 921 S. Beacon St., San Pedro, Calif.

Have sets, parts, speakers, etc. Want transmitter, short-wave receiver, B-eliminator, phonograph pick-up, or other radio parts. J. F. Talley, 346 Chestnut St., Rock Hill, S. C.

Will swap 3 old coins or 5 foreign coins for every book by Burroughs, Grey or Curwood sent me. Harlan Gates, Wellsville, N. Y.

WANTED—INFORMATION

Are you looking for anyone who has been missing for a long time? If so, write down all particulars and we will gladly publish your notice in ACE-HIGH. *Notices may be listed anonymously if you so desire. Before taking action concerning any answers received, be sure to lay the matter before us. We assume no responsibility for this department. Do not send any money to strangers. Notify us at once when you have found your man.*

BENSMAN, ALPHONSE—Born near Kalida, Ohio. Last heard of in New Orleans, La., in 1922. Information of his whereabouts will be appreciated by an old friend. A. L., care of ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE.

WI SEE—Chinese boy, last heard of in Ann Arbor, Mich. We would also like to correspond with any educated Chinaman who could write us something about his country, as we are very much interested in the study of China. Any information concerning the whereabouts of this Chinese boy will be thankfully received. Isolde Bert, 517 Borgess Ave., Monroe, Mich.

WILLIAMSON, N. S.—About 32 years old, 5 ft. 11 in. tall, light brown hair, gray eyes. He was a health seeker. Left Tucson, Arizona, April 14, 1920, to go back to Alabama where his mother and father lived. He wasn't sure whether he was going to stay there or come back to Arizona, or go to Colorado. His P. O. Box number was 992 in Phoenix, Ariz., and 871 in Tucson. He had a friend, J. W. Brookmire, in either Tucson or Phoenix. Any information will be very much appreciated. Myrtle Fell, 550 N. Penna Ave., Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

A. L. (MISS)—Last heard from in 1927. She was on her way to Colorado with an invalid sister. A. L., I still love you. Please write to me at same address. D. D., N. Y.

HOOP, GEORGE—21 years old, born in Whitestown, Ind. Last heard from in October, 1926. Any information concerning his present whereabouts will be appreciated by his sister, Mrs. Pauline Friltz, 189 21st St., Milwaukee, Wisc.

FLYNN, NELSON WINTWORTH, PVT.—Will any member of 62nd Co. of Coast Artillery Corps during the Spanish-American War who knew this party please write to Mrs. David J. Edwards, 325 So. 10th Ave., Scranton, Pa.

ROWELL, PIERSON—Last heard from in Detroit. For the good of all, please get in touch with your brother at same place. D. R., care of ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE.

SAILORS—Serving on the battleship "Maine" in 1894, I was traveling between New Orleans and Selmer, Ala., with two of these sailors. They left the train somewhere in Alabama, taking with them my discharge papers from the U. S. Army, one from Co. C, 19th U. S. Infantry, and one from Co. E, 14th U. S. Infantry. Any information concerning their whereabouts will be very welcome. Chas. Wells, Lock Box 192, Ravenna, Ky.

VINCENT, EDWIN—Your son Ralph Sherman is ill with paralysis and is seeking to get in touch with you or with Florence Rees, sister of Ralph. Please write to Ralph S. Vincent, care of ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE.

PHILLIPS, RUTH (MRS.)—And three small children, Lorraine, 6 years old, brown hair and eyes. Lucille, light hair, blue eyes, and is 4 years old. Robert, 2 years old, has dark brown hair and large black eyes. Information is wanted concerning the whereabouts of Mrs. Phillips and her three children by her husband. Please write to Thomas Phillips, 4 Fort St., care of R. Andrews, Omaha, Nebr.

BRIGSTOOCK, JOHN—19 years old, blue eyes and brown hair. Any information concerning the whereabouts of this party will be greatly appreciated. Miss E. Carlyon, 1000 Richmond St., London, Ontario, Canada.

CAROLAND, VIRGIL O.—30 years old, 5 ft. 9 in. tall, weight about 155 lbs., has light hair and complexion. Last heard from at Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he was working for an asbestos firm. Any information will be greatly appreciated by an old pal. Write. C. B. M., care of ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE.

LONG, GEORGE PAUL—About 28 years old, 5 ft. 8 in. tall, weight 160 lbs., has dark straight hair parted on right side, brown eyes, sallow complexion, and fine white teeth. Last heard of in Minneapolis, Minn., Christmas, 1926. Any information concerning his present whereabouts will be thankfully received. Mrs. E. M. Delaney, 433 W. 76th St., care of J. Spalding, Los Angeles, Calif.

* * *

AROUND THE STOVE

"THE WIND OF THE OPEN SPACES"

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading a copy of ACE-HIGH *and I feel I ought to write you to say it is one of the finest magazines I have ever read. To an Englishman confined to a city it is a treat. It radiates the wind of the open spaces, and the glory of nature. It is more acceptable to us because we have no Wild West, and it shows us what we have missed. Of course in the days of Robin Hood the whole country was a playground for men who were partial to other people's goods, but those days are passed, and now we are all as tame as white mice. Nowadays if we are going somewhere in a hurry, we can't get our horse and beat it, we must get a taxi and watch the meter. After all, that is pretty exciting at times.*

I think that "Around the Stove" is a very good feature. We have nothing like that in our English magazines, worse luck. My sister wishes to join me in this note of appreciation (she was as interested as I was in reading it), as we would be greatly honored if the Stovites would push up and give us a seat. We have always heard that Americans were great on hospitality, so now is your chance to show it. If your readers will write to either, or both of us, we will answer each and every letter. We don't mind who writes, or what they write about, any old subject at all. So get your pens ready folks, and help to swell the revenue.

Yours truly,
GEORGE and ADA LEE.

C/ Office, 77B Queen's Rd., Everton,
Liverpool, England.

PLEASED WITH "THE SLUICE-BOX"

Dear Editor:

Am forwarding another ad for "The Country Store" section. I had wonderful results in exchanges in the last issue, so I wish to try some more. Your articles in "The Sluice Box" by John Thompson are of great interest to me as well as many of my friends whom I have introduced to ACE-HIGH. *Few magazines give space to articles on minerals and fields, and no other magazine offers the field of exchange that* ACE-HIGH *affords, so hence I wish to compliment you on these articles and wish you continued success.*

Very truly yours,
JOHN M. TRACY.

601 *Orange St., Portland, Ore.*

ON COW RANCHES ALL HIS LIFE

Dear Editor:

I am a regular reader of your magazine, ACE-HIGH. *I have been working on cow ranches all my life riding, cowpunching, and all other kinds of ranch work, and I have been in Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon, Wyoming, Colorado and Montana. I have worked in them all, and now I would like very much to hear from some of the readers of this good old* ACE-HIGH. *Write to me and I'll try to answer all letters.*

Here's hoping to get a lot of letters real soon, and wishing ACE-HIGH *a prosperous future, I am,*

Very truly yours,
TOM M. LANDRY.

General Delivery, Missoula, Mont.

P. S.—I am 25 years old.

Be a
B.W.
Cooke-Trained
AUTO EXPERT
I Train You
At HOME
EARN
up to $5000
A YEAR
Quick Success Big Money
this new Easy Job-Way
FREE AUTO BOOK
3 repair & testing OUTFITS INCLUDED

Start to Make Money Quick Like Morriston

M. J. Morriston, Parkersburg, W. Va. (photo at right), never had a day's experience on cars before starting my training. Read what he says when less than half-way through his "JOB-WAY" course. "What I have already learned is worth over $500 to me. I have gone into business and I'm making over $50 a week clear, with wonderful prospects." And what Mr. Morriston and hundreds of others have done I will help you to do!

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You needn't slave away at small wages another minute—mail coupon and I'll tell you how I train you at home in your spare time for positions paying up to $150 a week. Unlimited opportunities for trained Electrical and Mechanical Auto Experts. Let me show you how my "JOB-WAY" training has prepared hundreds of men just like yourself for a quick, brilliant success in the Auto business.

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Don't sell your time for low pay! You don't need to when you have my "JOB-WAY" training. As Directing Engineer of this Institution I know what training you need to succeed. AND I GIVE YOU THAT TRAINING right in your own home. MASTER every branch of Auto, Truck and Tractor work. I train you with JOBS—not books. I bring the original "JOB-WAY" training TO YOUR HOME!

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Ten agreements in my big free Auto book. No. 1 is "I will refund every cent of your money if after receiving my training you are not absolutely satisfied." This and nine other wonderful agreements make my "JOB-WAY" course the training for you! Be sure to get my book and read all ten agreements.

Experience, Education Not Needed!

I don't care how little schooling you have, I will train you to become an Auto Mechanic or refund your money! Boys and men of all ages have become Garage owners and managers, Superintendents, Foremen, Auto Experts, BIG PAY executives, after completing Cooke "JOB-WAY" training. I prove to you that I will prepare you to take advantage of the many wonderful opportunities of the great auto business!

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Six Billion dollars spent each year to repair 18 Million Autos, Trucks, Tractors—it's the world's biggest business. Amazing money opportunities everywhere for trained men. My Employment Service helps you to big jobs, and I help you to get into business for yourself.

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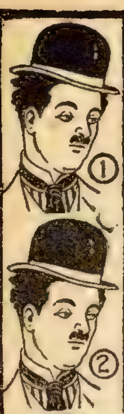
Send me FREE your Big Auto Book "Auto Facts" and proof that you will train me in spare time at home. Also details of AVIATION Course Offer. Also reserve 3 Testing and Repair Outfits without obligating me.

Name..

Address..

City.............................. *State*..............

Age............ *Occupation*..........................



WIN$3,500,00!

Here's news for puzzle fans: C. W. Francis, Matilda Hikens, A. F. Holt, Miss Leola Markus, Alvin Smith won from $1,400.00 to $3,500.00 each in some of our last puzzles. Over 800 cash prizes awarded within a year. In Oct. 1928 alone we paid over $11,000.00 in prizes and in the next few months will award between 300 and 400 cash prizes in our puzzles. Here's a new puzzle for you.

Find the "Different" Picture

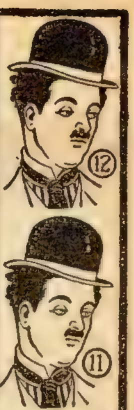
Here are twelve pictures of Charlie Chaplin, the world famous United Artists star. No, they're not all alike, even though they look alike. Eleven of them are exactly alike, but one and only one is different from all the others. That's the real Charlie Chaplin. Can you find him? The difference may be in the hat, shirt or tie.

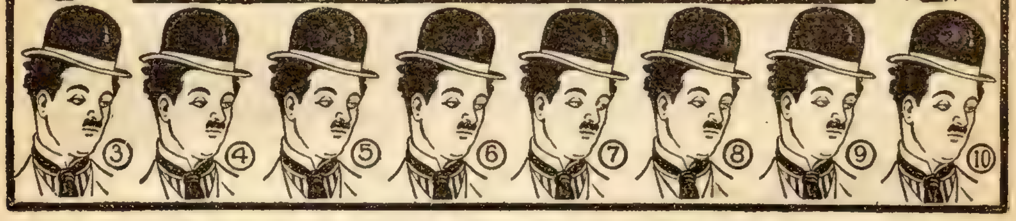
300 CASH PRIZES 300 prizes totalling over $7,900.00. $3,500.00 to the winner of first prize and duplicate prizes in case of ties. If you can find the "different" figure you may be the one to get this great prize.

CERTIFICATE FOR $1,000.00 TO APPLY ON GRAND PRIZE SENT AT ONCE AS BELOW IF YOU FIND "DIFFERENT" FIGURE

If you find the real Charlie Chaplin we will send, as soon as correct answer is received, certificate for $1,000.00 to add to the first prize of $2,500.00, if you win, and directions for getting largest prize. We spend over $150,000.00 this way each year to advertise our products locally. No cost or obligation. Nothing to buy now, later or ever. Everyone rewarded if actively interested. Just send the number of the "different" Chaplin in a letter or on a postcard. That's all. Send no money.

F. A. HARRE, ADVERTISING MGR., DEPT. 161, 510 N. DEARBORN ST., CHICAGO, ILL.





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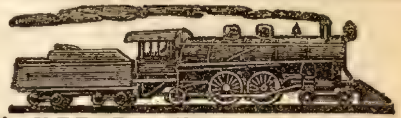

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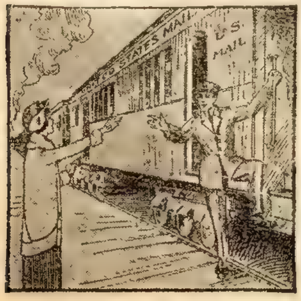

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For lower prices and a better selection—order your gifts from Loftis! See these three great specials—your choice at $43.75 each—tremendous values! Rings and watches are 18K solid white gold set with dazzling blue white Diamonds! **Terms:** $4.37 down, balance payable weekly, semi-monthly or monthly. **Shipped (NO MONEY DOWN) subject to your free examination, on request.**

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Mine's fine, thank you. It wasn't always so. You can easily get rid of your Dyspepsia, Indigestion, Catarrh of Stomach, Belching, Heart Fluttering, Sour Stomach, Nervousness, Constipation, Headache, etc., same as I did, and in the same way. Don't send one cent, for I am so sure this treatment will produce like results for you that I will send it, all charges prepaid, by mail.

After it has proven itself the means of getting rid of your stomach troubles, you may send me one dollar. How is that for confidence and fairness? Write now. Address, Theodore H. Jackson, 84E Stratford Bldg., Syracuse, N. Y.

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These are the facts, just as I learned them. In 65% of all men, the vital prostate gland slows up soon after 40. No pain is experienced, but as this distressing condition continues, sciatica, backache, severe bladder weakness, constipation, etc., often develop.

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These are frequently the signs of prostate trouble. Now thousands suffer these handicaps needlessly! For a prominent American Scientist, after seven years of research, discovered a new, safe way to stimulate the prostate gland to normal health and activity in many cases. This new hygiene is worthy to be called a notable achievement of the age.

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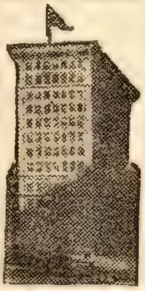

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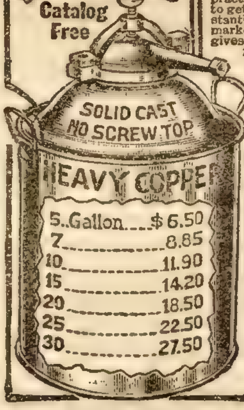

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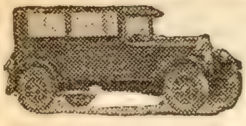

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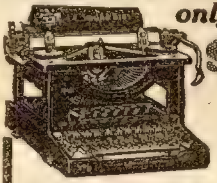

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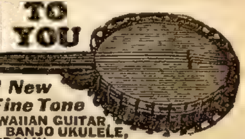

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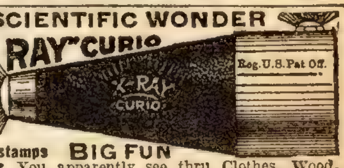

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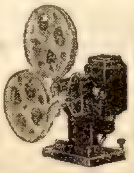

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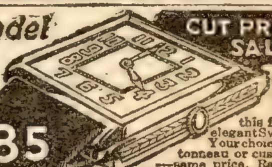

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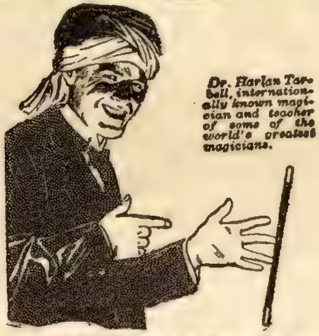

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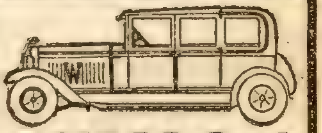

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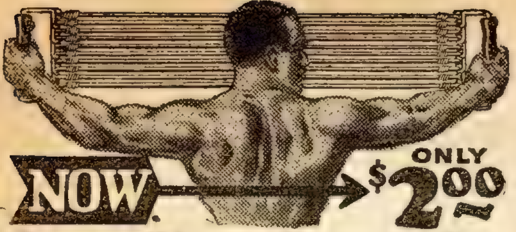

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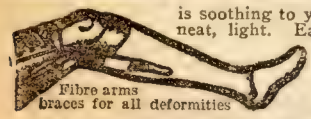

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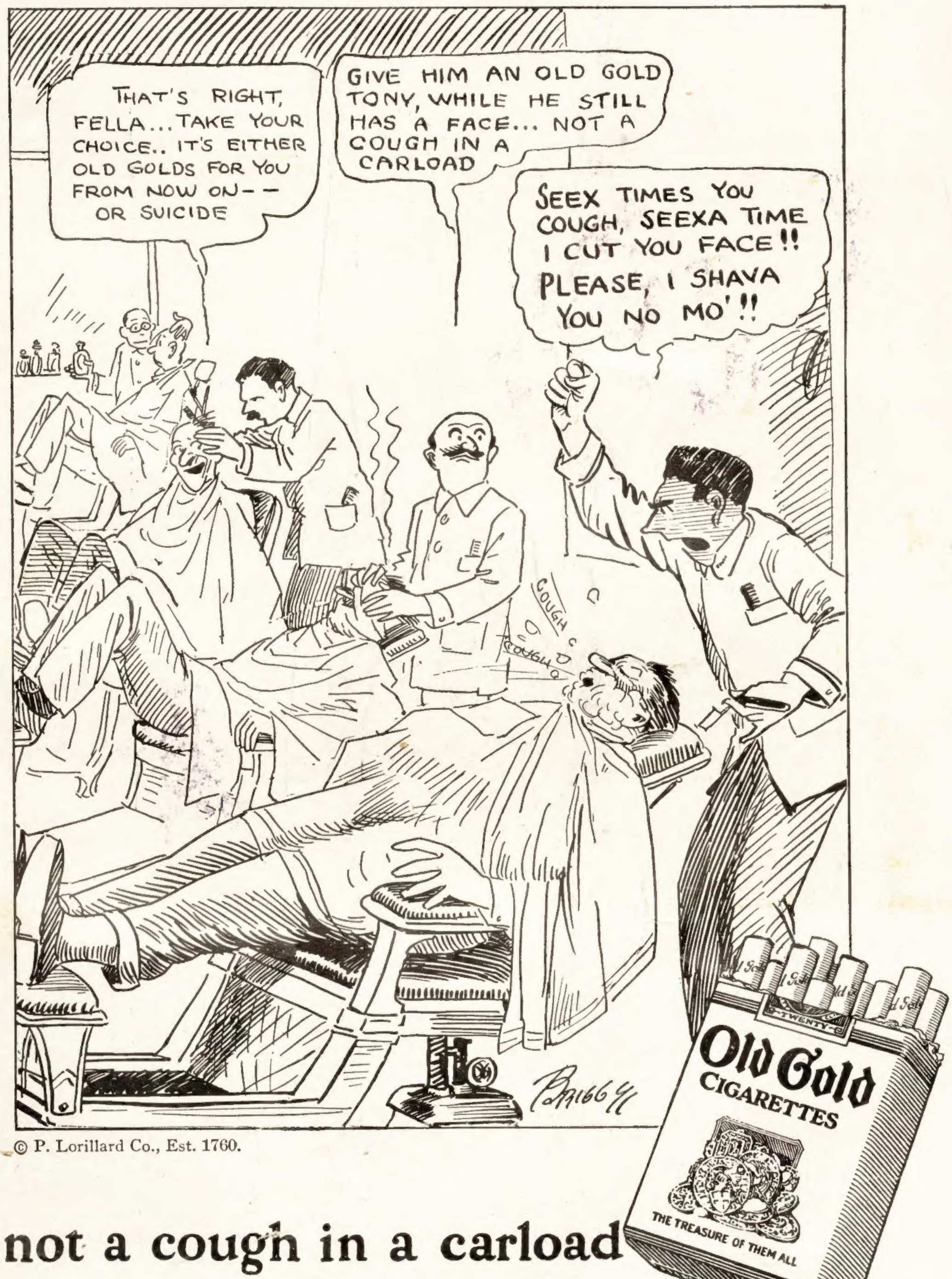
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